

# Networking for democracy



An analysis of the needs of the sector  
and proposals for new networking efforts

Joe Mitchell | August 2020

# 1. Summary and recommendations

Our democracy faces serious challenges. Substantial new efforts are required to counter those challenges — and to build upon and improve our democracy. One of the most effective ways to support this work is to connect the efforts of those pursuing such goals.

This report is the result of two months of interviews across the sector and a small literature review. Thanks are due to everyone who gave their time to be interviewed and to the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust for funding the work.

Interviewees were first asked whether a ‘democracy sector’ exists. Most interviewees agreed that it did, that they were part of it, and they recognised that this linked them with others pursuing democratic ideals. Further research is required to better delineate the boundaries of the sector: depending on your definition of democracy, it could include almost every campaigning organisation. Indeed, some interviewees thought that that level of inclusivity should be a deliberate goal for any networking effort. Questions remain over other divides between organisations in the space: should the networking efforts be aimed at creating a stronger UK-wide network, or nation-specific networks? Are distinct efforts needed to connect those outside London?

There was wide agreement that the ‘sector’ is weaker than it should be and that there are particular issues around working together. Interviewees suggested the sector was small, fragmented, under-funded, lacked vision, lacked clear policy asks, struggled to engage the public, was short-termist and guarded or competitive. The cause of such problems relates both to a lack of existing collaboration, trust or social capital, but may also be structural, relating to how the sector is funded as well as the abstract and contested nature of democracy. On the plus side, some interviewees spotted opportunities around outsized influence and around a growing awareness of the democratic deficit.

Aside from funding, the needs of organisations within the sector are multiple. The most frequent response concerned better connections within the sector, followed by connections outside the sector. Greater influencing power, greater sharing of information, operational assistance and better public engagement were the next most popular. Some interviewees mentioned sector-wide organising and evaluation. Interviewees were asked to briefly consider what they could offer the network, which mostly included access to politicians, the media or academics.

A growing literature on network science suggests how some of these needs might be met. More densely connected networks can share information or knowledge more rapidly; broader networks can connect insiders and outsiders; the thicker the bonds between organisations the more likely they are to collaborate on projects, taking advantage of each other’s strengths and reducing duplication. Any efforts at

networking would not 'create' a network, because it already exists. The goal is to 'weave' more and better connections between organisations in the space, as well as to introduce new organisations or 'nodes' to the network.

The capacity of the sector to take part in networking efforts is limited, but most interviewees were keen on taking part. Some suggested they would need a fairly instant return; others recognised that returns may be slower. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations should be mobilised to support better networking efforts. When asked about the best communication tools (imagining the simplest networking efforts to be the provision of a mailing list, forum or online chat), there was little agreement on the right platform, other than that whatever platforms are used, they must be moderated and kept up-to-date. Twitter was held up by several as a useful tool for networking.

Several recent attempts have been made to better network the sector, including campaigns, central hubs and events. To some extent, the lesson appears to be that the more you put in, the more you get out: the better resourced central hubs and conferences have kept going for longer and added more value, while attempts at informal events (which may be vital for building social connections) have been harder to sustain.

The democracy sector can learn from other sectors on what works for networking. The report highlights some goal-driven efforts and some communities of practice, from Crisis Action's handbook on coalition-building, to New Economy Organisers Network's iterative see-what-works approach. #OneTeamGov, a network of civil servants, provides an example of a light, decentralised approach to networking. A recent, more in-depth research report on the migration sector identifies very similar 'network infrastructure' needs.

The interviewees, literature and author have provided a range of ideas for new efforts to support better networking and ultimately collaboration. These are presented in the List of Recommendations below.

The next steps for better networking in the sector include deciding how best to resource and organise the efforts suggested above. It makes sense to start at the thinner, less expensive end of networking efforts, while also giving the efforts enough time to prove themselves useful or not. Efforts could be centralised or decentralised, and there are pros and cons to each approach; it may be necessary to begin with a centralised approach before gradually becoming more decentralised. There is some disagreement on whether it is sufficient to simply provide a platform or space to organise, or whether a direction needs to be set in advance. The geographic or jurisdictional scope of the network should be considered, as well as the openness of the network. The report suggests a range of roles that could be given to a central hub or to a range of organisations working in a decentralised way. Funding for the efforts could come from a pooled resource

model and ideally should do, in the long run. In the short run, at least, such efforts are likely to need startup capital from funders.

Measuring the success of the networking efforts will be difficult, but not impossible. Regular social network mapping and surveys of the sector will help gain a sense of whether the sector is becoming better connected.

There are risks to making renewed efforts at networking. The efforts could: fail to result in better engagement; encourage poor quality collaboration; create additional work for members; rely too much on a small number of individuals; or create an exclusionary network that weakens the sector. All of these risks can be mitigated.

It is clear that this sector can be more than the sum of its parts, but only if requisite efforts are made to join it up. There is much to do, and the most significant benefits of better networking could take years to realise. So let's start now.

## List of recommendations

### Recommendations to the sector

- A. Share information:
  - 1. Collaborate on drawing the social graph of organisations working on democracy;
  - 2. Collaborate on an online democracy sector handbook, which could include: a directory of organisations; links to research; links to data; case studies; lists of funders, press contacts, political roles; upcoming democracy 'events'; and policy tracking;
  - 3. Establish a shared forum/ mailing-list.
- B. Build community:
  - 4. Create a range of standing meetings to be used for discussions, asks-and-offers, training;
  - 5. Trial 'action learning groups' among peer groups;
  - 6. Create cross-sector buddying or mentorship, especially for new staff;
  - 7. Consider co-organising an annual festival for democracy;
  - 8. Establish a space to discuss the sector's policy asks.
- C. Coordinate and build consensus:
  - 9. Create a shared calendar of organisational plans, such as planned press releases, to better coordinate and reduce duplication;
  - 10. Collaborate on a list of who is applying for what funding;
  - 11. Create cross-sector coordination groups of directors, and board members, to review organisational goals;
  - 12. Collaborate on a sectoral audit to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats;

13. Regularly run horizon-scanning or scenario-planning workshops to prepare the sector for the future;
14. Develop a shared understanding of what a good democracy looks like in the UK;
15. Develop corresponding metrics and sectoral goals;
16. Develop a sector-wide policy platform, with a view towards influencing the 2024 manifestos;
17. Develop shared understanding of better communications framing.

D. Collaborate:

18. Pool a proportion of turnover to fund a network hub;
19. Make joint funding bids for collaborative projects;
20. Share working and events spaces;
21. Pool operations, influencing, press and evaluation functions;
22. Adopt sector-wide communications framing;
23. Pool resources for polling, focus groups and audience segmentation.
24. Approach all of the above with an experimental mindset: test what works, but give efforts sufficient time to either bed-in or to clearly fail.

**Recommendations to existing hubs in the sector:**

25. Create a quarterly 'convening of convenors' to bring together the clusters in the sector.

**Recommendations for any new hub\*:**

26. Support the sector in all of the above tasks, based on regular needs reviews;
27. Perform a librarian role for a collaborative handbook;
28. Perform a matchmaking role, introducing relevant parties across the sector;
29. Perform a signposting role to any new entrants;
30. Provide funding and technical support for running online meetings or events;
31. Ensure that new information or resources are shared across different platforms, allowing network members to opt-in to whichever they prefer;
32. Consider the physical location (if any) of a hub carefully, with a presumption against a main base in London;
33. Provide mediation or conflict resolution resources;
34. Offer work and/or events space for the sector across the UK (or organise the availability of such);
35. Provide corporate governance or fiscal sponsorship for startup (or one-off) projects or campaigns, potentially incubation or acceleration support;
36. Exemplify the culture desired from the sector: be open, generous and effective.

*\* If efforts are decentralised, the sector should organise to parcel the tasks out among themselves.*

**Recommendations to funders:**

37. Provide startup or matched funding to a network hub, hosted by a specialised organisation;
38. Use the social graph of organisations to identify and fill gaps;
39. Consider longer-term core funding of organisations;
40. Consider incentivising collaboration through grants;
41. Consider a more open grant application process, allowing people to see overlap earlier in the development of projects.

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## 2. Introduction

Our democracy faces serious challenges. Many new efforts are required to counter those challenges — and to improve and innovate upon our democracy. One of the simplest things that can be done to strengthen our democracy is to better join up the efforts of those working on such efforts.

The author spent the last five years helping to set up [Democracy Club](#) to work on a small piece of the improving democracy puzzle: more accessible voting information. Through this work and through meeting many others working on democracy, it became clear that while democracy faces a range of significant and perhaps rapidly increasing threats, the state lacked the impetus and was often not the right actor to respond to such challenges. The third sector actors were small, underfunded and lacked some of the ‘network infrastructure’ that exists in other sectors, such as a support network, a place to ask questions, a conference, an attempt at strategic coherence, and so on.

Over those five years, the author experienced occasional attempts to bring elements of the sector together, particularly in the run up to elections. But these were one-off events, resulting in a couple of welcome new connections, but no new collaboration. For not much investment, and with some patience, it seemed likely the sector could do significantly better at networking for democracy. This research was conducted to judge the views of others in the sector and to develop concepts that could be put into action.

### Methodology

This report is based on 52 interviews carried out across July and August 2020. Some 45 interviews were with people directly pursuing democracy-related projects, five with people involved in network hubs in other sectors, and two with experts in networking or community-building. The majority were already known to the author, i.e. the author relied on his view of the network, rather than any objective map, but a significant number were introduced to the author for the project by other interviewees.

The author approached the idea of the ‘democracy sector’ broadly and made efforts to connect with organisations of all sizes and across all nations of the UK. However, the limits of the author’s knowledge of and connections across the space will have influenced the direction of the report.

The research has also involved a light literature review of network science, a field which has grown significantly in the last 20 years. There is a growing interest in applying this science to social change and the literature in this area was particularly useful. A small list of further reading is appended to this document.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the interviewees for their enthusiasm and giving their time. A list of organisations interviewed is appended. Thanks to the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust for funding the work.

### 3. What is the democracy sector?

The author approached this project prepared to be told that there is no such sector or that it is more weakly defined or understood than, say, the housing sector or healthcare sector. One of the research aims was to understand whether people and organisations see themselves as part of a democracy sector and to understand where its boundaries lie.

The question was typically the first posed to the interviewees. The responses showed that most people were comfortable with the term, but that it lacked clarity:

*'If pushed, yes, would say we were part of a 'democracy sector' — put us in with civic tech and deliberative types.'*

*'Everyone who is campaigning is in the democracy field.'*

*'Within all the big org's [e.g. FotE] there'll be someone who cares about this.'*

*'Yes, we're working on local journalism because of the democratic deficit. It's all about local democracy: local planning, road closures, council meetings.'*

*'We don't talk about democracy in the day-to-day, but what we do is vital to it.'*

*'We're not seen as part of democracy sector, even though we look at funding of politics and actions of politicians in office.'*

*'Feel remote from the 'democracy sector' cos of where we are [not in London] and how we tell our story'*

*'Also, what is the democracy sector? Too broad? Too far apart?'*

*'Yes we're working on democracy, is there a democracy sector? No.'*

*'There's no hub in this space, no natural leader.'*

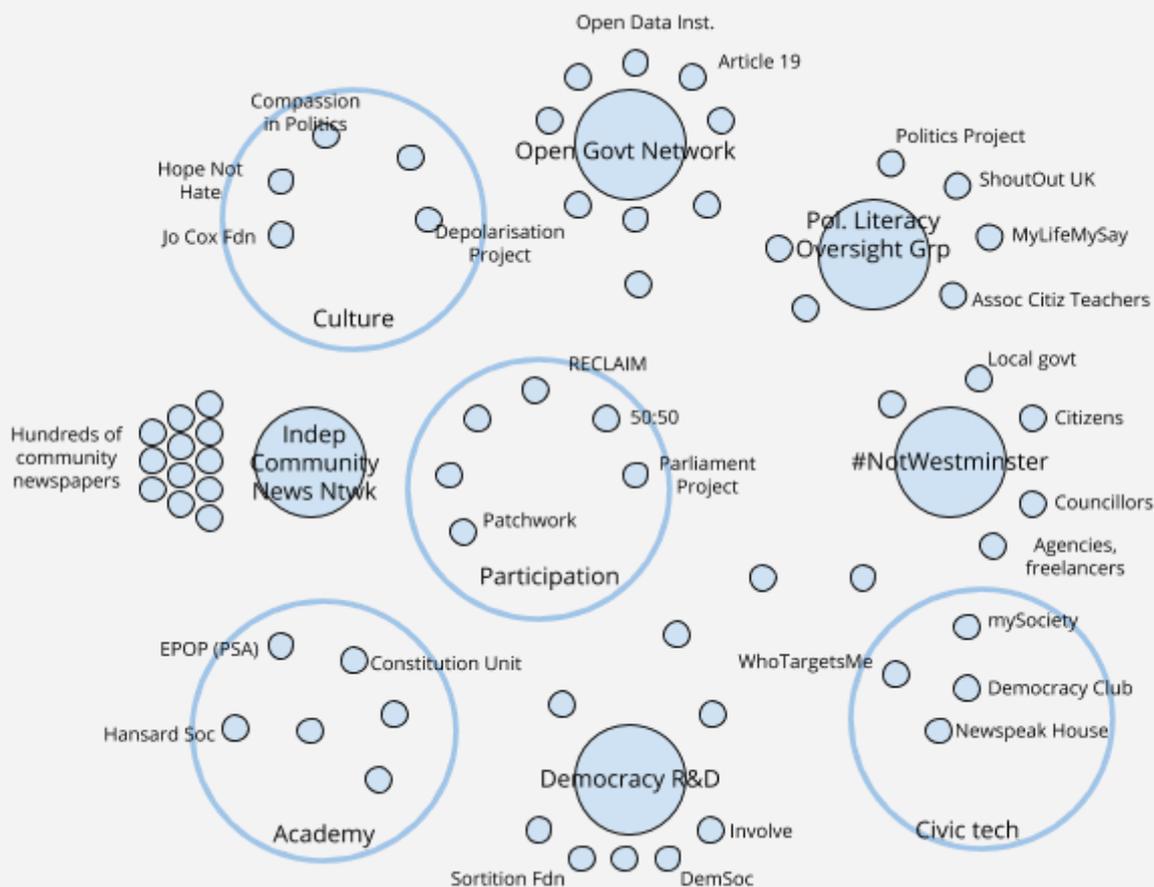
*'Is there enough agreement on important issues and values?'*

*'Could you call it a "UK governance sector"?''*

The shape or inclusiveness of the 'democracy sector' relates to the sometimes vague concept of 'democracy' itself. Interviewees suggested the concept was 'incredibly broad' and 'multi-layered — from political institutions to grass-roots community stuff — it's basically how people live and work together...is that too broad' ... "Democracy is a difficult word... maybe better to work with democratic principles?'

The research proceeded on the basis that there are several aspects to democracy and that there are several fields of organisations working on those aspects. An

incomplete sketch of some of the aspects of democracy and the hubs or clusters around them, is below:



*Anecdotal and incomplete sketch of a few clusters within the sector (hubs in blue-fill, loose groupings in light blue circles). This is not a social graph — see section 11.*

Clusters not included in the sketch above include those relating to the constitution — both monitoring it and calling out rulebreakers, and calling for its reform. There are also groups around free speech, freedom of assembly and around transparency and accountability. More broadly, there are egalitarian elements to democracy: can someone buy their way to an outsized influence? Does someone living in poverty have the resources to take part in the democratic process? This ‘egalitarian democracy’ issue, in particular, reaches to the fringes of what might be considered the democracy space, where everything starts to look like a part of the democracy sector. Further research in this area would do well to focus on those edges, to speak with civic organisations such as the Guides or Scouts as well as with campaigning organisations in more clearly defined fields, such as healthcare, the environment or housing.

*‘Generally [we’ve] got to bring others into the democracy space... “I care about the NHS, therefore democracy matters because xyz”*

However, it is not only the definition of democracy that shapes our understanding of the sector or community. One question concerns the role of the tens of thousands of elected officials in this space and the political parties. It might be hoped that they would be among those most likely to share an interest in defending and strengthening democracy: if democracy has a coalface, they are the people at it. In terms of networking, however, the assumption was made for this report that the vast majority of politicians already belong to a strong network: their party. Their need for networking is not the same as for those outside the party system. But this assumption could be tested in future research.

The sector can also be divided up by geography and jurisdiction. For example, is it more useful to think about trying to network a UK-wide democracy sector, or to imagine different sectors or communities within each nation?

*'Scotland is its own beast, but it's not as great as English people think!... Citizens are further from their government: there's only one tier of local government...'*

*'In Northern Ireland the politics is so different...'*

*'Wales doesn't have a democracy sector...'*

Similarly, what is the existing network of those working on improving democracy who are based in London as compared with the network of those working in small towns or rural areas? Geographic co-location is bound to affect the thickness of ties in a network: what effect does this have? Does it suggest a priority of networking those not in London, as one interviewee said?

The answer is perhaps to imagine the sector as many overlapping communities, or as more tightly knitted clusters within larger, more loosely tied networks. The approach then might suggest multiple overlapping networking efforts, with a priority towards connecting clusters or 'convening the conveners'.

*'The divides are between the campaigning types (and they have the eCampaigners Forum) and the non-campaigns-y (and they have nothing)'*

*'The big split is between those seeking fundamental reform and those seeking piecemeal change'*

*'I divide the world into funders, thinkers, activists...'*

*'Identify the extremes and find out what they have in common'*

## 4. What are the problems of the sector?

There was wide agreement that the 'sector' is weaker than it should be and that there are particular issues around working together. Views varied on how significant the lack of networking was — some seemed resigned to it, as a natural consequence of the system. Others were frustrated that more had not been done to attempt to join the sector up.

Many interviewees regarded the sector as small, fragmented and not adding up to more than the sum of its parts. One remarked that projects are transient, particularly around elections, and can disappear, leaving no lessons for the future. More deeply, while some of these problems are of a kind that could be solved with some energy, a little resource and goodwill, some of the problems are more structural. They particularly concern how the sector is funded, and the abstract nature of democracy.

*'[It's a] fragile, underfunded, bitty space... There's no core responsible [person] in government either...'*

*'It's small scale, there are no fields of practice within the sector; there's no work on talent or learning and development.'*

*'It's not clear who holds the democracy brief.'*

*'How do we coordinate the pop-up org's that appear around elections...and how do we learn from them?'*

*'The sector has some small networks, but is mostly fragmented. There is too much repetition of the same work.'*

Most of the sector relies on grant-funding, which can weaken incentives for the kind of work that might knit the sector together.

First, there seem to be simply fewer funders in this sector, resulting in scarce funds, making it harder to think beyond organisational boundaries and plans.

Second, funding is typically for projects, not core organisational costs, which has resulted in a lack of attention paid to core roles, such as research, analysis, strategy, training and development.

Third, the timeframes of project grants are typically short — 12–36 months — which may not be enough for slow-burn projects that benefit the whole sector. While new 'sector-wide' funding might appear before an election, if no long-term efforts to build social capital have been made, then the good relations required to work successfully together at a stressful time are likely to be missing.

Fourth, the requirements for showing impact in grant applications may encourage organisations to narrowly define a target group of beneficiaries, which may curb their enthusiasm for more imaginative or more informal efforts that may be harder to measure, but would meet the needs of a broader community.

*'...all this [working together] relies on trust.. And if you're competing with people for project grants, there's no desire to help..'*

*'There is deep competitiveness.'*

*'[We are] protective over our political relationships, because a politician only has limited time...only wants to meet a few groups...making it harder to pass that connection on.'*

*'There's lots of duplication, lots of competition, it's depressing. Everyone is minding their patch or brand or funding model. People have strategic plans for the next four years and they're not agile enough.'*

There is no clear vision of the world the sector wants to create. This lack of vision may be due to genuine disagreement: there never has been any agreement on a perfect system of governance. Or it may be due to a lack of overlapping visions. A group that seeks electoral reform may have little in common with a group seeking a better version of the existing system. One interviewee saw the sector as particularly defensive, trying to prevent harm to an existing system, rather than laying out a vision for a better democratic future.

*'Lots of fragmentation — different policy asks from across the sector... several of us might broadly be after the same thing, but instead we make asks that are highly specific... an umbrella could have multiple asks... There's too much tinkering... We need to look at the sum of all things together.'*

Communications about democracy or of better democratic governance can be or feel esoteric. The democracy sector lacks appealing storytelling subjects and quick wins. Worse, some of the communications from the sector, such as urgently proclaiming that 'democracy is in crisis', may harm public trust in democracy. One interviewee pointed out that, worse than simply lacking good stories or frames, simply talking about democracy seems to elicit a negative response, perhaps a little like talking about politics.

*'[There seems to be a] culture or psychology of terror when it comes to talking about democracy.'*

The sector also lacks an ability to show progress. Improvements to democracy are hard to measure and lack the scientific veracity available to other sectors. The public health sector can point to clear, measurable trends, as can those working on

biodiversity or climate change. The democracy sector lacks much data and does not make good use of the little data that does exist.

But it's not all bad. Some interviewees spotted opportunities for the sector.

*'I think civil society more broadly [is] realising that the democratic deficit is part of the reason that they're not succeeding.'*

*'It's small and fragmented, but it does have an outsized influence.'*

## 5. What does the sector need?

The vast majority of interviewees thought more needed to be done in terms of networking. Even allowing for politeness towards the interviewer, several interviewees were glad that this work was being conducted. Nonetheless, it is important to understand the problem that any networking effort would be trying to solve.

Below, the needs of the sector are listed, in order of how often they arose in the interviews. Interviewees were asked to consider their organisational needs, rather than the needs of the sector, but these often overlapped.

### 1. Connections within the sector.

*'I'd like more one-to-one chats to test relationships, learn from each other, test ideas, maybe collaborate... want to know who else is doing relevant stuff to me.'*

*'We want to know what's going on with other organisations.'*

*'It's just nice to know who's doing what, where...'*

*'Want to establish a critical mass, to meet regularly.'*

*'We need more frontline links.'*

*'Need access to people with lived experience, people on the ground.'*

*'We're looking to distribute our [academic] work across the sector — want it to have real world impact.'*

### 2. Connections outside the sector.

*'Need opportunities for cross-sector collaboration, intersectionality, cross-party working, local government connections, public sector collaborations.'*

*'Cross-sector connections are appealing — get the greens involved.'*

*'Need to get out of our bubble.'*

### 3. Greater influencing power with government, within parties, particularly the Conservative Party.

*'How are we moving together to influence government and politicians?'*

*'We can have more impact by working around a common agenda and common set of asks of government.'*

*'We should be working together on IER, boundary commission stuff, if we speak as one voice we'll have more power.'*

*'An APPG is useful to attach parliamentarians [to the work] and keep pushing on reports, avoid reports gathering dust on a shelf somewhere.'*

*'We would like to learn about influencing local government, in particular.'*

*'The capacity issues aren't just money, but skills... we could do more on policy discussions ... we'd be interested in partnerships with thinktanks.'*

*'Party conferences are too expensive to attend or organise an event at, but offer opportunities for campaign planning, speakers, social events...'*

#### **4. Greater sharing of information or knowledge.**

*'Even people who are in this space struggle to understand different parts of the system; create some space for information and education. It's complex stuff!'*

*'[A] resource for research: data, insights, barriers to public participation and so on.'*

*'[Where do we go with] questions like where to print flyers or t-shirts?'*

*'Case studies, good practice.'*

*'We want access to new research, partnerships with academics, and to the latest thinking.'*

*'I need specific area expertise, such as on the environment, electoral reform, or corruption.'*

#### **5. Operational assistance.**

*'We got some legal advice, but we have no infrastructure, funding, or support... [which means we can't] keep in touch with some other local authorities who are interested.'*

*'[Something to] do the boring stuff.'*

*'A 'Boring Stuff Agency' [for the sector] sounds great. We need that as a small organisation: we spend all our time now creating the organisation, rather than working on the projects we care about. We'll need HR advice, templates at some point; access to legal advice; bookkeeping, accounts; website advice; content generation; volunteer management; and help finding partnerships.'*

*'GDPR help would have been useful.'*

*'Everyone knows about something, nobody knows about everything.'*

*'HR stuff, e.g. sharing time on each others' recruitment interview panels.'*

*'Tech help, e.g. how to organise lots of local chapters.'*

*'Occasional office space in London.'*

*'Pro bono legal advice.'*

*'Website, tech help.'*

*'Facilitation.'*

*'Admin support.'*

*'Rolodex of expertise, toolkits and briefings.'*

**6. Public engagement**, particularly around how to talk about democracy in a way that chimes with the general public.

*'We need better public-facing campaigns'*

*'I'm not sure democracy is the right word — we don't have it anywhere'*

*'The lack of a coherent narrative, the lack of language that makes it relevant to other sectors and society. What's the story we want to tell about why this matters?'*

*'The 'democracy space' is too focused on systems or electoral reform... it must attach itself to issues that people care about...'*

*'There is so much crap messaging out there [from campaigners] that actually harms democracy, e.g. #NotMyPrimeMinister'*

*'We want to raise expectations of the public, to create a demand for democracy'*

*'Who's the big-name celebrity who could lead a democracy movement?'*

*'How do we make it feel tangible?'*

**7. Sector-wide organising**, particularly in terms of longer term planning and understanding the sector's goals.

*'The sector spends a lot of time of 'defence' and not enough on vision'*

*'We need a collaborative initiative that can test solutions'*

*'We should co-create this network!'*

*'You always need neutral brokers [in supporting a sector]'*

**8. Better metrics and evaluation.**

*'We need more KPIs/metrics on democracy... for us it's about individuals feeling empowered, but that's just part of the picture'*

*'We've been around 10 years — what's our impact?'*

## **9. A project archive.**

*'After the general election there had been a lot of tech solutions/tools/data that vanished... and with it all the lessons. This happens every election and is a weakness of civic participation sector.'*

## **10. Support for scaling up.**

*'I got a lot of emails after I was on the radio [re strengthening local democracy]... it's not sustainable to try to answer them all myself.. But I really don't want the work that goes with setting up an organisation...'*

Leadership development and coaching did not arise in the interviews, but seems important enough to mention here, and it is regularly a project of other sector's networks. This would have in mind both executive leaders and those in governance positions.

## **And the offers?**

As well as needs, interviewees were asked what their organisations could contribute to the wider sector.

*'We can offer access to MPs, such as the Solicitor-General and to the legal aid sector.'*

*'We'd value opportunities to lend our support, platform and connections to initiatives, organisations or individuals working specifically to tackle barriers to participation for ethnic minority communities.'*

*'We've very strong parliamentary networks and detailed briefings.'*

*'We have had success getting stories in the press, including the Daily Mail.'*

*'We know a lot about governance, especially of WhatsApp groups.'*

*'We can offer political advocacy, messaging and narrative expertise.'*

*'We've quite good access to politicians... including with red wall Tories.'*

*'We have physical assets for running events.'*

*'We have access to good lawyers and academics.'*

*'Have good relationships with political systems/parties... and we can do fundraising on behalf of other organisations.'*

*'We offer strong academic links, robust policy briefs, some good media connections, and some good political connections.'*

## 6. Why do networks matter anyway?

“Network effects” are the benefits to existing users of additional users of a service. They present an opportunity for a virtuous circle: the more people use a service (or join a community), the more valuable it becomes to the users/members, so the more people feel it essential to use/join it, so the more valuable it becomes...and so on.

Knowledge of network effects has been popularised by social media platforms like Facebook or LinkedIn: it is clear how social media platforms become more essential the more of your contacts join. The ease of connecting online means that such effects can grow more rapidly than offline.

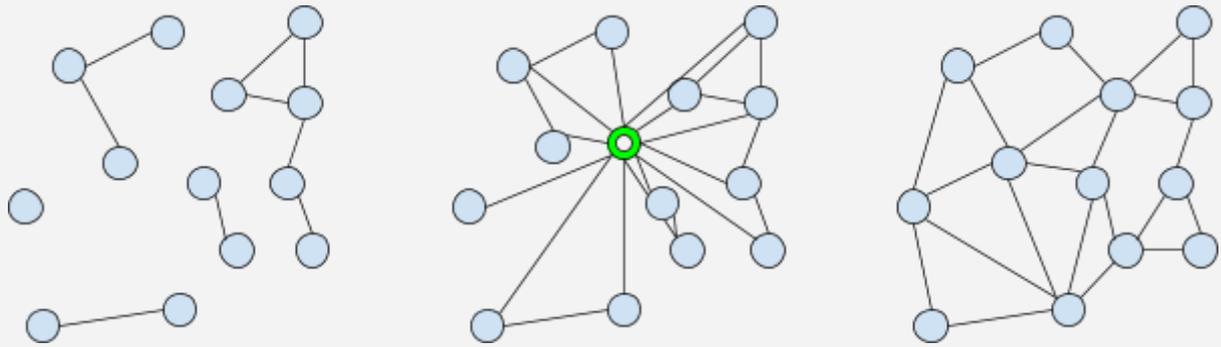
The benefits that accrue in such a way are multiple. Perhaps most clearly, densely connected networks allow for new information, ideas or resources to flow more quickly to all actors, making everyone’s work more effective. Networks can allow for information to move between parties that might never communicate directly. Routes through a network may connect the most cautious insider to the loudest outsiders, who never talk, but who are in fact pursuing similar goals.

*‘Networks with high density may be more able to drive innovation and action by reducing duplication, fixing gaps and dealing with issues too large to tackle individually.’ (New Philanthropy Capital, 2020)*

A community of like-minded organisations or individuals allows for more collaboration on projects and reduced duplication. They allow for comparisons to be made about performance, and about the best approaches to problems.

There are already networks in the democracy sector: connections over twitter, connections from conferences attended and sometimes connections from collaborative projects. The work to improve networking isn’t to ‘create’ a network, but to densify it or expand it. Densifying means drawing new connections between those in the network, and expanding means bringing in new nodes to the network, diversifying the network, reducing the risk of groupthink, allowing new information and ideas to spread through the network.

*‘Connect on your similarity, and profit from your diversity.’ (Krebs & Holley, 2006)*



*Simple network graphs showing a central hub, which may distribute information more quickly, or a less centralised network, which may be more resilient*

Increasing the number of connections across the network can result in a more resilient community, avoiding the risk that a central hub disappears and takes the value of the network with it.

The literature on networks refers to roles for those who can densify or expand networks. For 'network weavers' or 'knitters', the role is to densify the connections between the nodes of the network. Other roles include 'closing triangles' — making sure that nobody is left trailing, reliant on a chain of nodes that could lose one connection and thus the link to the whole network. There are also roles in strengthening the existing connections between nodes, building trust and enhancing the prospect of better collaboration. By mapping networks, analysis on clusters or strong communities can be made, which might identify clear influencers that had not been considered before.

## 7. What capacity does the sector have for networking?

There is constant competition for time and attention. Generally, however, interviewees were positive towards the value of networks and professed a willingness to at least try anything that might come out of this research. Due to a lack of time, some interviewees felt like they would need something back — a return on their time-investment, though one specifically pointed out that they did not expect this.

*'[We have] informal links via twitter and there are networks of individuals, but we don't invest time in it... I love networking, but not got the time to meet'*

*'It needs a tangible offer. What's in it for the organisations?'*

In some of the literature, there are discussions around the virtues of offering practical benefits to the organisations (extrinsic motivations) or offering a greater chance of meeting our overarching goals, should they exist (intrinsic motivations). Hopefully networking efforts can do both.

*'It needs to meet the needs of "me", but it's also bigger — it needs to save democracy.'*

*'Join for what you can get, stay for what you can give.'*

The summary of someone who has organised a 'hub' before, was that:

*"People are happy to show up to the meetings, and to comment on documents, but they don't want to do the admin."*

The unwillingness to do the admin does not seem at all unreasonable and suggests the need for a hub or 'backbone organisation' to provide the infrastructure and maintain the space for quality networking to happen.

## 8. What networking tools does the sector already use?

Online communications for networking seemed important even before the Covid-19 pandemic, but now everyone interviewed — from one-woman-bands to tech-heavy organisations with 20 staff — could reel off extensive views on the best ways to stay in touch online.

There was, however, precious little agreement on the best platforms, other than that Twitter came off well: several people mentioned it as the best way to know what is going on. A social graph of Twitter connections would be relatively easy to produce and could provide the data for regular snapshots of the network.

*'We run a popular closed Facebook group for Q&As, but stuff gets lost in it.'*

*'I'll talk to people when I know them, otherwise I'm a bit of a passive consumer of information (e.g. Slack... I like a Slack)'*

*'I'm in lots of Slack channels, but only really check our own organisation's'*

*'Slack has not been useful for the network... it needs liveliness, momentum...'*

*'Nobody looks at Slack... typically just contact the individual via twitter or WhatsApp... Everyone is time poor, [so the solution isn't] a mailing list; maybe it's a social meetup over zoom, with each quarter taking a theme'*

*'Would need a prompt to go look at another Slack and then might have a look around... but my colleagues are across more Slacks than me'*

*'We wouldn't have the capacity to engage with a Slack group/different platform.'*

*'WhatsApp moves too fast if it's a big group, it's too hard to follow.'*

*'Prefer email for big mailing list, WhatsApp for small groups'*

*'Forums with email are the best — Discourse is working well for us'*

*'Yes, I read mailing lists'*

*'I already get too many emails...I would prefer a one-stop resource to go to'*

*'[Mailing lists are okay if] it's moderated, if there's restrained emailing, concise...'*

*'Email feels swamping, WhatsApp is better, less heavy'*

*'X's WhatsApp group is superactive, getting actions going, sharing info'*

*'WhatsApp groups are good; Facebook groups yes; email lists I don't check'*

*'I'm in a WhatsApp group with some CEOs, also use it for quick 1-to-1s'*

*'Quarterly Zoom calls are good for a general update; monthly if there's a team working on a shared action/plan... I'm more likely to stay engaged if I know it's going to happen regularly...'*

*'My ideal [solution] is a weekly or monthly Zoom with a 60-second update from each person, supported by a secretariat to follow up on actions, share documents, suggested tweets'*

*'Monthly themed chats around a standing Zoom call, people pitch stuff they want to learn or talk about are a nice idea, but set expectations for consuming and contributing'*

*'We have been frustrated that we can't engage more in some of the intra-sector [in-person] roundtables etc.'*

Some suggested that, rather than the tools themselves, it was how the tools were used that matters:

*'Just let me know the full year calendar [of events] in advance.'*

*'Whatever channels [a network uses], they need to be looked after and maintained.'*

*'Email lists can get messy: etiquette matters.'*

## 9. What networking efforts already exist in the sector?

Several attempts have been made to better network the sector in the last decade. These include central hubs with their own staff teams, to one-off events organised in the spare time of those keen on the idea. The more formal hubs seem to have survived longer than the more informal efforts.

### Coalition campaigns

**Democracy Matters** was a project to defend adult education and political literacy. Its tactic was to lobby politicians in the run up to the 2010 election. The coordinator reported that it did well, meeting with senior politicians such as Oliver Letwin, and ultimately meeting much of its aim, but only through to the next parliament of 2015. Membership was made up of invited groups; there was no membership fee. It had a near full-time unpaid organiser with support from the CEOs of some of the partners. Today the organiser still maintains an email list with a significant list of interested parties.

### Network ‘hubs’

**Democracy R&D** is a hub for an international group of organisations and individuals interested in democratic innovation, particularly around deliberation. It was initiated at the end of an in-person meeting at the World Forum for Democracy (this is a running theme in network organisations: they are founded out of an in-person event). The group has had physical meetings in Madrid, Paris and Manchester and will meet in Berlin next year. The hub has some staff capacity and offers a space for discussing impact and encouraging collaborative learning. It hosts videocalls, runs a mailing list and forum, and tries to develop standards, produces case studies and runs surveys. It is a membership body, which charges dues to members based on their size.

**Political Literacy Oversight Group (PLOG)** is or was a hub for those working on citizenship education and was perceived positively by its members, who highlighted it as among the best examples of networking hubs in the space. It was seen as having created space for building relationships and joined-up advocacy. The Political Studies Association is currently looking at ways to continue to strengthen the sector, which may include taking on PLOG’s work.

**Brexit Civil Society Alliance (BCSA)** is made up of 80 formal members, with more informal members, such as those signed up to the newsletter. It includes many small charities, *‘those on the frontline’* and has made efforts to bring in organisations from across the UK. It has three staff members, representing one of the most significantly supported hubs in the space. To join, members had to sign

up to four broad principles relating to democratic oversight around Brexit and initially were carefully invited to add legitimacy and weight. The alliance is scheduled to close at the end of the transition period, but the hosts are considering whether it could continue in another guise, with a focus on capacity-building, comms co-ordination and joint messaging and framing work. One interviewee said the alliance had the usual coalition problems: *'it's difficult to find a unifying plan with so many members.'* Another particularly highlighted the value of the hub's concise 'Brexit briefings'.

**[Independent Community News Network \(ICNN\)](#)** is a Cardiff-based hub of two people, which aims to support small news publications by improving skills, access to funding and training. In Wales, it distributes a small fund from the Welsh Government. The members of the network use Slack, mailing lists, Twitter, WhatsApp, a website landing page/handbook, but have had less success with Facebook. ICNN said they would welcome more cross-discipline networking and that in order to better support its network, it's looking to grow its ability to better respond to requests for help, as well as tech expertise to help develop new tools (like a hyperlocal wire service).

**[Open Government Network \(OGN\)](#)** has had a full time staffer for some of its history at the UK level, but was described as in 'hibernation' now. The Network was developed as part of the UK's membership of the Open Government Partnership, which required the UK Government to produce national action plans with the support of civil society. Both Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own OGNs and link with the UK network. Since 'open government' has slipped in the government's priorities, the network has lost some of its impetus, and its funding. It maintains some assets, including a mailing list of hundreds of members. It was perceived to have a decent track record, including making connections between clusters of open data, freedom of information and technology folks, under a clear goal (and realistic opportunity) to influence government. One interviewee suggested there was a tension in OGN between the *'showers-up and the doers'*, while another interviewee suggested the network had worked well across the nations, allowing each to go at a different speed.

**[Newspeak House](#)**, or the 'London College of Political Technologists' was founded around five years ago and is a rare example of a shared physical space for those in the sector (and more broadly). Membership is open to individuals for a monthly fee. Prior to Covid-19, Newspeak House offered a regular events schedule, including a weekly agendaless meetup around a shared evening meal. It has been home to some innovative collaboration efforts, including the popular Election Tech Handbook and Coronavirus Tech Handbook, as well as being a home for many networking events and workshops. It may be difficult or expensive to replicate, though spaces like The Federation in Manchester, which provides office space to cooperative-friendly businesses, and the Impact Hub spaces more generally suggest that providing physical space to grow networks is valuable.

*'I feel Newspeak could do more to encourage collaboration, such as providing some kind of director of skills...'*

*'The weekly meetup [at Newspeak] is good — always a good mix of usual suspects and new people.'*

**Digital Action** is a relatively new donor-backed hub with several staff, which aims to *'strengthen democratic rights in a digital age.'* It is inspired by the Crisis Action model, which is outlined in the ['What can we learn from networks in other sectors'](#) section below, but essentially builds opt-in coalitions around the most pressing issues. It plans to try various organising approaches behind the scenes. Projects are opt-in and it maintains a lightly used Slack.

*'Digital Action is a good example of an action-driven and effective coalition which has enabled us to be able to communicate more effectively on the Online Harms white paper with, for example, the Secretary of State of DCMS.'*

*'Can we just have a "Democracy Action"?''*

**Media Reform Coalition** is a hub for a coalition with a coordinating committee and elected voluntary chair and vice chairs, who also serve as the administrators. It benefits from infrastructure support from a university (i.e. access to a press office, human resources support and a bank account). One of the challenges for the coalition is bringing together 'different generations' of people interested in this issue, who can often have very different worldviews. (A similar point was made by another interviewee in relation to groups campaigning against violence against women). The coalition set up a Media Democracy Festival which had over a thousand people register online after the offline version was cancelled due to Covid-19. Previous events were described as important in building the community: *'people loved the after-party.'*

## Events

**#NotWestminster** is an annual informal conference in Huddersfield, dedicated to local democracy. The hosts invite a deliberate mix of disparate groups and try to celebrate good work. They regularly invite councillors, but attendance is low among this group. The hosts report that they are at capacity — around 150 people — and that this is the right size. With greater funding there might be the opportunity to run a similar event in other regions of the UK. Their challenges include showing impact and supporting ideas from the conference to be realised.

*'The value created is the personal relationships — we've tried other more formal projects, but it doesn't work.'*

**Democracy Hubs** was an effort to create informal evening gatherings of the sector, one for the north of England (Manchester) and one for the South (London).

They involved pitches at the start of the night followed by networking. A popular local journalist was invited to speak at the Manchester event to draw in more people. After three events, they were perceived to have gone well, but that there was no obvious next step. Nobody stepped up to help convene the events after the third, so they ran out of steam.

**DemFest** was an attempt at a national democracy festival by The Democratic Society. It took place in 2017, over a weekend at the Gladstone Library in Wales. One interviewer pointed out that they thought that *'[The Democratic Society] was originally meant to be a network, doing this sort of thing, but it had to change to be sustainable.'*

**Informal meetings, e.g. 'Democracy drinks'** by, at various times, the Electoral Reform Society, Unlock Democracy and Involve, and perhaps others, have attempted to provide a regular space for simple agenda-less meetups. One host aimed to encourage local groups to start them around the UK, and found that this didn't catch on. None of these efforts has been sustained over time, due to a lack of enthusiasm or a lack of capacity to keep organising, and Covid-19 has not helped.

## 10. What can be learned from networking efforts in other sectors?

There are plenty of approaches from other areas that could be borrowed. Seven varied efforts are reviewed here.

### Goal-driven communities

[Crisis Action](#) is a 15-year-old, behind-the-scenes conflict/humanitarian sector organiser. It's on the more assertive end of the spectrum: a strong central hub drives projects which other organisations can opt into. It receives some funding from those it helps organise, but the vast majority of its funding is from grantmakers. In 2017, it published a short handbook on how to build creative coalitions in the Crisis Action model, which includes the following lessons:

- Crowdfund the analysis or intel to get 'good enough' insight;
- Pursue impact, not consensus: set the goal and then allow people to opt-in;
- Do fewer things, better;
- Lock in SMART goals early;
- Curate the group — don't let anyone dominate;
- Apply talent/expertise of the coalition to the right area;
- Operate with a vanguard, but keep rest of sector informed;
- Stay behind the scenes;
- Be generous;
- Constantly nurture relationships, play match-maker;
- Hire the most-smart/least-ego ratio;
- A networker is '*part talent scout, part orchestra conductor, part sports team coach*'.

[New Economy Organisers Network](#) spun out of the New Economics Foundation in 2015. It's made up of hundreds of people across 'the progressive movement'. It has a central hub with a staff team of around 15 people, running training, events and a spokespersons network. Roughly their first three years were spent building the community and delivering to the needs of the organisations, while the latter three have been more pro-active, taking a view of where the sector needs to go.

*'NEON took ages to get it right, but its offer to us is quick answers and training'*

*'The mailing list was a bit of a nightmare to regulate'*

*'NEON does now have a thematic issue area focus: housing, NHS, etc.'*

*'We were building a sense of community... gradually learned more about the sector's needs, set up programmes according to their need'*

## Communities of practice

[e-Campaigning Forum \(ECF\)](#) began as a conference for anyone interested in the nascent field of digital campaigning in 2002. Its predominantly UK-based membership numbers in the thousands and the mailing list is constantly active with questions and answers, sharing of best practice, job opportunities and discussions. Anyone can apply, but must be personally approved by the founder of the forum, who maintains (and lightly moderates where necessary) the email list and runs an annual conference, made up of training sessions and open space sessions. It's a good example of the value of a light layer of networking infrastructure across a very broad network.

[Online Progressive Engagement Network](#) is a network of e-petitioning organisations (such as 38 Degrees and national equivalents across 15-20 countries) who contribute financially to an international hub to share technology, lessons, and campaigns that need to cross borders. One interesting feature of the hub is that in a team of nine staff, there's a role for a 'librarian' (a role highlighted by Newspeak House too), part of whose job is to keep abreast of the work of each individual member (typically via their Slack) and to share around useful bits to the rest of the network, in an elegant solution to the 'I can't read all the Slack groups I'm in' problem.

[Ariadne](#) is a private community of 500-600 donors across Europe. It creates private resources and public resources, runs masterclasses and how-tos, produces monthly online briefings, which summarise the latest research, legal news, events and jobs. It holds networking events and dinners through the year, including policy meetings as well as the "Lemon of the Year" dinner to discuss donors least successful grant. The community is opt-in, members choose what they use and attend. Members are asked to make an annual voluntary contribution towards the network at a level they choose, which then enables them to attend workshops with reduced fees, but the list of donors on the website is small, so presumably the network hub relies on a small number of large donors.

[Migration Exchange](#) is a small group of funders with reported high levels of trust and broad goals. It aims to support shared learning, identification of gaps in the migration sector and joint efforts to fill those gaps, particularly around infrastructure. The exchange published a 2020 report based on research with CEOs of migration organisations that has resonance with any network for democracy, for example:

*'Over 90% of funder and CEO interviewees either agreed or agreed strongly with the proposition that "the sector must pool its collective resources more if it is going to achieve significant policy changes."*

*'Capacity, a lack of trust and/or competition for resources all inhibit collaboration and lead to organisations focussing on organisational rather than sectoral goals.'*

[#OneTeamGov](#) is a very light-touch network that offers connections with like-minded civil servants. It was originally sparked by the idea of bringing different communities of practice within the civil service together, and began in 2017 as an open invite to breakfast meetings every Friday. These meetings had no prior agenda: those who showed up decided what they would talk about. OneTeamGov has since organised several unconferences and today is manifested by those weekly breakfast meetings, a hashtag; a Slack; a mailing list; a podcast; a logo/badge to use; and a code of conduct. Some organisers were given time by their departments to work on the network, but it has largely relied on the energy and enthusiasm of individuals. One interviewee told me that they *'hold it lightly'*, because those individuals will change over time and so the concept needs to be easy to pass forward. The concept has spread from Whitehall to other hubs across the UK, and from the UK around the world, especially in Commonwealth countries.

*'I joined [OneTeamGov events] because I know the people are good.'*

*'There's a high cadence of meetings that are run at high energy — the aim is to leave people buzzing with ideas.'*

## 11. What new networking efforts should be made?

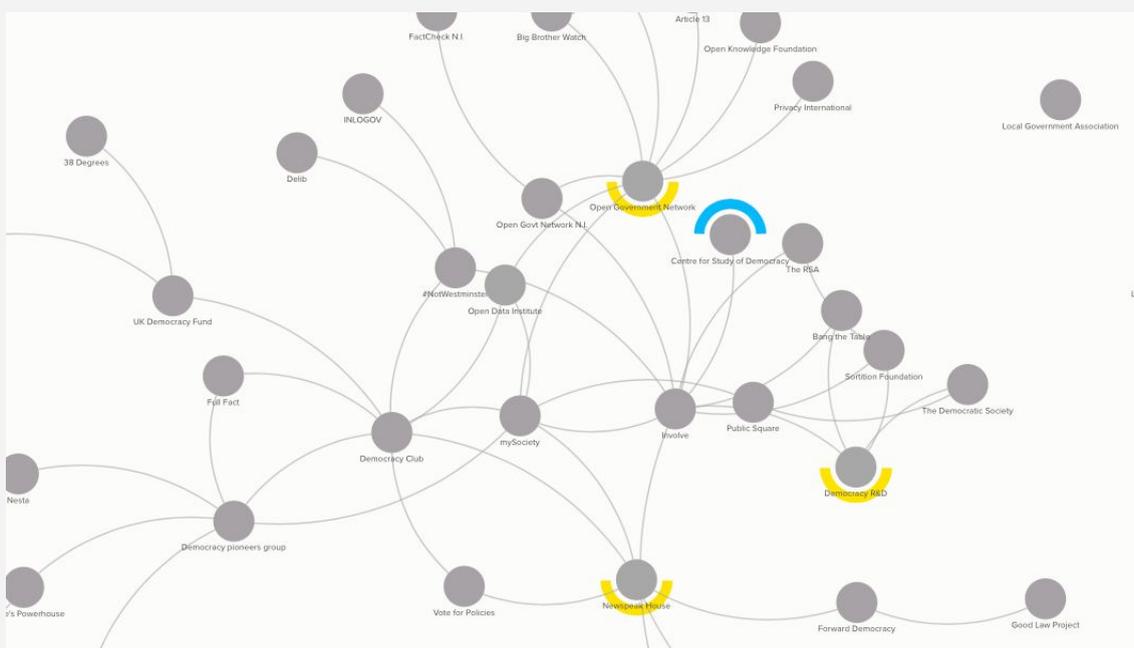
Some networking will always happen naturally, but there is much that can be done to proactively develop networks. The list of ideas below come directly from the interviewees, the literature, or have been developed by the author, reflecting on the research. They are broken down by phases of thinner to thicker engagement (numbers 1-5) and within those categories by some order of priority given to them by interviewees, though this was not discussed on all calls, so should be taken lightly.

### 1. Sharing knowledge and information

#### **Maintain an open, collaborative map of the sector**

The first step in network strengthening is to see who is in the space, who's already connected, who the influencers are, where the hubs are, where new connections could be drawn. A regularly updated map of the sector was the most requested resource. Some interviewees wanted a directory of who else was in the sector, so they could find the contact details to connect with specific parties, others literally wanted a 'map' or social graph in order to see the connections. An open map of the sector could empower everyone to play a role as a network-weaver or coalition-builder. Mapping twitter connections might form a simple proxy.

The author has drawn a [basic social graph](#) of the organisations he spoke to and the connections they mentioned. A snapshot is below. Clearly this does not represent the whole democracy sector or the connections within it, but it gives an impression of what a social graph can tell us. There are some clear gaps, such as any kind of hub or connections between academic/research institutions that work on democracy (highlighted with a blue tag). There are also some pointers as to who is best connected: in this graph it is Involve, even though they are not a 'hub' organisation (hubs highlighted with a yellow tag).



A snapshot of part of [the social graph](#) of interviewees for this report

Drawing a more detailed graph, or crowdsourcing it, would allow for hundreds more nodes and connections to be drawn, allowing more accurate insights to be gained. Additional information can be added to the nodes, such as turnover, location or staff levels, and added to the weight of connections, such as 'works with' or 'shares trustee'.

*'I would love to see a map of all organisations in the space, where the overlaps are, where the gaps are, where we are competing for funding and who I should contact about X issue.'*

*'It's just nice to know who's doing what, where...'*

*'Mapping work is key: people don't always identify as democracy-related'*

*'[You should] understand the clusters... then think about a network of networks'*

*'Mapping would be extremely useful'*

*'Who is talking to who and by which means?'*

*'How does information or resource flow in the network? Once mapped you can see the story of a journey from one node to another node; of the topography, distance, density and resilience.'*

*'Map people, assets, relationships... measure what matters to your goal'*

*'Think broad: local authorities, schools and universities should be included'*

## **Proactively curate and share useful information**

This could involve creating and curating both a regular one-to-many newsletter, and a many-to-many mailing list or other online space for sharing new information, useful resources, questions and answers. An effort should be made to ensure the information is available across whichever platforms people prefer to use.

The collaborative handbook model, along the lines of the Election Tech Handbook, would be valuable: it could form the directory, resource hub, a collaborative archive of projects, a place to celebrate success stories and build up a case study library. It could also include a shared calendar of external and internal events, links to statistics or polling on democracy, areas of academic research, a list of funders, a list of press contacts, tracking of politicians with a democracy brief and tracking of relevant policies.

*'I need to know stuff about diversity — if we're going to get a bunch of councillors elected, need to worry about this, but don't know anything... so who do I ask? Who in the network?'*

*'A mailing list would be valuable'*

*'Brexit Civil Society Alliance was a good model: a hub of expertise and crucial info emailed each week in three bullet points.'*

*'A lot of digital comms only works if there's pre-existing social capital from the real world.'*

*'Be aware of Conway's law ["communication structure determines output structure"].'*

*'Build a hub for contacts directory, data, templates — wiki-style.'*

## 2. Building community

Many interviewees felt that there was a need to build trust and social capital across the space. Networking efforts should build a sense of connection, shared purpose, provide private spaces for discussion or 'stupid questions'. Some of this might occur indirectly, via projects with other goals, but it should be a networking goal in itself.

Informal events, such as Delib's recent online pub quiz or tangentially-related-to-work formats like Pecha Kucha presentation evenings (see, e.g. 'Wine and Wotsits' in the campaign space) would make a good start. Reading groups or book clubs could help people both to chew through weighty research or policy publications and create informal space for thoughtful, open discussion.

One-to-one introductions — or matchmaking — are likely to be valuable where there is good oversight of the whole sector and it is clear that person A would benefit from talking to person B. Intentional introductions can go beyond simply making the connection, instead following up to understand the value of the connection and help strengthen the tie ('how did you get on', 'are there areas of agreement', 'can we help with any follow-up steps?'). Similarly, a node with good oversight of the sector and a wide range of connections across it can help perform a signposting role for new entrants to the networks, or those on the fringes — ensuring they meet the right people as early as possible, reducing duplication and increasing solidarity.

There may be a role for peer-to-peer coaching, at any level of organisational hierarchy. While the principal aim is to coach better performance, the method by which this is done could build strong bonds. 'Action learning' — small group peer-to-peer coaching sessions — would be worth trialling. Such programmes could take place in-person or online.

Other options include buddying systems, secondments and more intra-sector hiring, which might be realised by information on jobs flowing more quickly across the network: all should lead to cross-sector pollination.

*'Provide space for junior folks to chat together too, not just directors'*

Regular thematic or skill-based peer group meetings could exist at multiple levels of formality. For example, there might be quarterly roundtables of a closed group of organisations comparing their challenges for the next three months (e.g. one interviewee requested a webinar on how to influence the 2019 parliament intake); another standing meeting could be a more open call for help or offers of help; another could be a quarterly speaker series entirely open to the public. Hosts could invite speakers based on the needs of the sector. All the above could be tested for a year to see what works.

An annual, in-person meeting, conference or festival might be useful to make progress on cross-sector work and build bonds across the space. This could include workshops on policy development or communications, 'fail-fests' where failures are discussed openly, open space sessions, training sessions, speed-networking and so on. Alternatively or additionally, piggybacking on existing events could be tried — such as a joint approach to party conferences that pools resources to get a shared venue or platform.

*'A national conference would be fun: see DemFest and Democracy Camp (was it in Wales?). [My sense is that it] needs to be less formal, more carnival, more like "here's your slot, fill it with whatever you like" or "here's a location, be here this weekend, organise whatever you want".'*

*'Conferences aren't a very efficient way of networking people.'*

*'An annual shindig — both internal- and external-facing would be good — NotWestminster is great, but it's small-scale and there's nothing else out there.'*

*'Isn't a democracy festival just [The World Transformed?](#) [or [The Big Tent?](#)']'*

*'Check out the [Ripples of Hope festival](#), [Byline Festival](#) or the [Human Rights Watch Film Festival](#), which was perfect for getting students involved'*

This is a long list — the best approach is to try several approaches, commit to running them for long enough to properly test whether they are adding value and then decide whether to continue with them.

*'Provide multiple spaces, some totally open, some totally closed — allow people to choose what's useful for them.'*

### 3. Coordinating and building consensus

More deliberate than simply sharing information, but requiring less trust and effort than full-blown collaboration, coordination implies some light organising to try to avoid competition for funding or attention (of the press or of politicians) and to avoid the duplication or the repetition of work. This might involve some effort to better sequence the work of the community — or even to distribute tasks. The kinds of efforts required here might include:

- A collaborative calendar of organisational plans;
- A collaborative list of who-is-applying-for-what-funding;
- A regular sector audit, identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and coordinating efforts to fill gaps;
- A trustees/NEDs coordination group;
- An executive directors coordination group;
- A collaborative horizon-scanning exercise, the next 6/12/24 months for anything that could influence the sector;
- Collaborative scenario-planning or preparedness exercises for necessary campaigns in future.

At the same time as starting to coordinate the work better, or in order to get to that point, the sector will need to build consensus. This includes growing an understanding of shared goals and how there might be a collective move towards those goals. Efforts to build consensus might include:

- Working towards a shared understanding of what a good democracy looks like;
- Developing sectoral goals and metrics;
- Developing sectoral policy asks, perhaps with a view towards significant backing for a programme for democracy into the 2024 manifestos;
- Working towards shared [framing](#) of communications;

- Conflict resolution resources or offers of external support for this.

One interviewee recommended the [Transformational Index](#) approach for some of this work, which could be supported or funded by any central hub.

## 4. Collaborating

If the requisite trust, consensus and access to information exists across a network, then collaboration can take place, pooling the expertise and resources of the network to achieve more together. This may require, and would also be evidenced by, joint funding bids from the sector.

This could include pooled resources, such as:

- Physical co-location for desk work or events (*'a Tufton St for democracy'*) either offered by members of the network or centrally provided;
- A corporate vehicle, fiscal sponsorship or incubation/acceleration for new ideas, one-off projects;
- Access to operations functions, including human resources, finance, tax and legal advice; template documents; updates and briefings on changes; shared administrative assistants;
- A shared influencing resource, such as shared venues at party conferences, a shared public affairs function, insider organising within political parties to identify allies and spoilers;
- A shared press or PR function, either staff roles or use of an agency; and training opportunities;
- A shared communications research or project, such as working on and adopting new framing, a large-n audience segmentation, access to regular polling and focus groups to test ideas and messaging, and/or shared email lists, use of shared hashtags;
- A research and evaluation function to track the progress of the sector over time and connect organisations with academic research and advice.

Several interviewees mentioned potential collaborative campaigns concerning voter ID, the 'page 48 issues' of the 2019 Conservative manifesto, or on civil liberties such as facial recognition.

Lastly, though it was not mentioned by interviewees, there are organisations working on such similar goals that they may benefit from the reduced overheads resulting from merging. Offering advice, help or brokerage through any complexity and difficult questions could help organisations to take advantage of such opportunities.

*'Collaborating is a habit — so get people into the habit!'*



## 12. What next?

This report has outlined a view of the sector, the problems it faces, the needs of organisations within it, some examples of networking efforts made in the sector and in other sectors, and made a list of potential efforts for better networking. So what next? Should the sector self-organise to organise better networking efforts, or does it need an injection of new external resources or changes to the systems of grantmaking?

There is a range of options from thin to thick engagement, reflected in how people name these efforts: from forum to network, group to collaborative, alliance to coalition, federation to partnership.

Reflections from the interviews and the literature suggest that the sector should begin at the thin end and work towards thicker engagement over time. Depending on resources, it might be possible to introduce a range of approaches concurrently, which organisations can opt into as appropriate to their ease with the issues or approach and their capacity. Some of the products or services of the network may be generated by a small group and be open to all, other services or products might be best reserved for those willing to pay or sign up to values or principles, or greater still, a specific policy agenda.

*'There are right and wrong ways to create a network... so. if there start being membership fees, revenues or it starts to need to sustain itself, so starts running own campaigns, [list-building] — that's a problem.'*

*'Just needs to be a thin layer to support the network — [e.g. a] mailing list.'*

### **Centralised or decentralised?**

The most typical route to providing infrastructure to support better networking efforts might be to fund a central hub, which could be instituted as a new organisation, or more simply, hosted by someone in the sector, a funder, or by a corporate host specifically designed to play this role, such as [Global Dialogue](#) (which hosts or has hosted Ariadne, Migration Exchange and the Thomas Paine Initiative, among others). If hosted by a funder, there may be a more implicit or explicit incentive for grantees or applicants to make efforts to engage with the network, and the hub itself might be less likely to be seen as competing with the members for grants. If hosted by a funder or an existing member of the network, there's a risk that the hub will, wittingly or not, and for better or worse, adopt the perceptions and culture of the host.

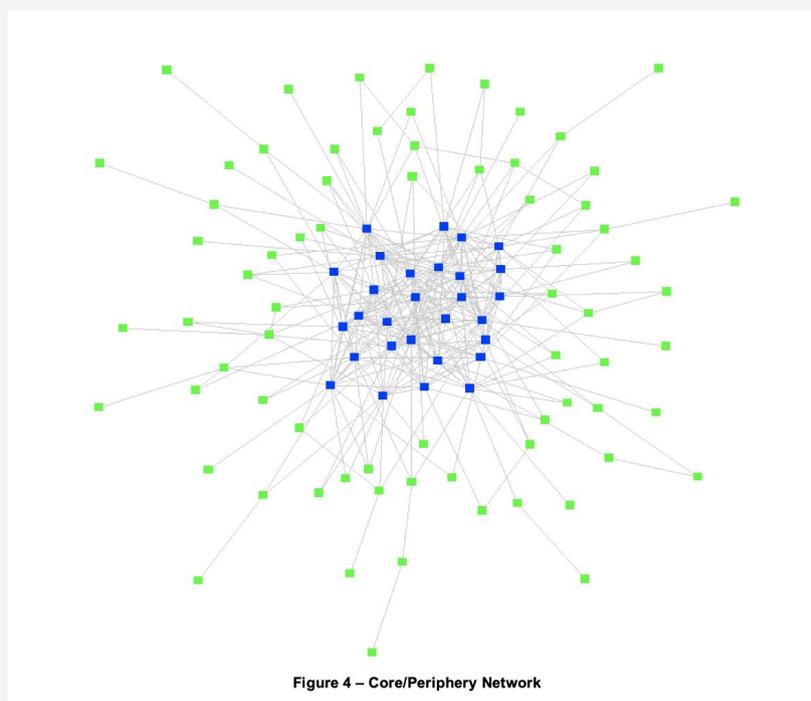
It may be unnecessary to create a central hub. Roles in networking (discussed below) could be self-organised, or parcelled out with grants by a funder, among the network. This would meet the principles of creating a 'leaderful movement' (in

the words of the Hong Kong democracy protestors), rather than give one thing the responsibility (thus absolving everyone else). However, given the track record of the sector in self-organising for networking and the perceived lack of capacity, this may be overly optimistic. Decentralised governance presents difficulties: how should tasks, goals or priorities be set, how is funding for those tasks distributed, and how would organisations be accountable for their roles in the network?

*'Work together to build the thing.'*

*'Purposefully working together is the best way to create something useful.'*

It is possible that both approaches will be needed, either alongside each other or centralised at first, before giving way to a decentralised approach over time. Some of the literature suggests that a 'backbone organisation' or central hub is typically necessary earlier on in the networking process — and that later, when the network looks like the model of a very densely connected core and periphery (see below) the central hub may no longer be needed.



*An optimal network (after several stages of networking) — from Krebs and Holley, 2006*

### **Agenda-neutral vs goal-driven**

Some interviewees felt the priority was an agenda-neutral space to allow the community to decide what it thinks and for network members themselves to work out how to work better together. On the other hand, several people felt that there needed to be a clear common purpose to drive any networking effort. The approach may vary based upon the level of centralisation. A core group could develop the main purposes of the network before inviting a wider group to join.

*'You're either crystallising an existing network or you're lighting a beacon to attract a new community.'*

*'Give explicit clarity on what it is and what it's for... manage expectations.'*

*'Come up with some values (or get an initial group to co-create this work)... what do we agree on, or is there at a least a diagram of values or approach?'*

*'If it doesn't have a common goal, it gets bumped...it's just a "nice to have".'*

*'It might need a compelling mission to attract people.'*

*'[Just] create the space for the magic to happen.'*

### **UK-wide vs a nation- or region-based approach**

The default approach would be to make efforts to build a stronger UK-wide network, but it is worth considering whether it makes more sense to pursue nation-specific networks and a network of those focused on local democracy (while of course making connections between these clusters). As is suggested elsewhere, sufficient resources would allow for efforts to support multiple overlapping networks and to see what works.

*'England has the greatest need for this [effort].'*

*'[Northern Ireland] has lots of small community-level organisations. Politics is very different here.'*

*'Wales doesn't have its own "democracy sector".'*

### **Open vs closed**

There is a question of how open networking efforts should be. Is the network simply anyone who perceives themselves as working on democracy — and thus do they have access to all the pooled resources produced? Or is the network more closed, with a set of values or principles that members should subscribe to? If closed, who decides who joins? A central hub could do this, or members could nominate and second new members. The upside of openness is that it is likely to get greater network effects and reduces the risks of groupthink and exclusivity. The downside is that members may be less likely to share resources and less likely to speak freely about problems, challenges or failures.

## **Roles**

The roles to be performed in networking efforts will remain similar whether they are performed in a centralised or decentralised way.

**Network-weavers or matchmakers** grow and strengthen the network through new introductions and deliberate connection-making between parties, following up after connections are made, checking up on relationships, keeping abreast of

entrants and exits. They spot gaps or less connected clusters in the network and work to enmesh them in the rest of the network.

**Facilitators** create space, ensure all voices are heard, maintain agendas, and, crucially, ensure meetings and calls finish on time.

**Moderators** ensure codes of conduct or values are upheld.

**Organisers** maintain an awareness of the sector's needs and organise to ensure such needs are met.

**Mediators** help manage or reduce conflicts that arise across the network.

**Librarians or curators** help to maintain collaborative directories of organisations, resources or assets. They keep abreast of the work of all organisations and of any networks in space and help signpost to the resources people need.

**Hosts** with physical or online space offer this to the network.

At the most 'thickly engaged' end of the spectrum, there may be roles for network-wide researchers, analysts and in operations (as listed above).

## Resourcing

Some interviewees recognised that a better network will not occur overnight. Others raised the importance of creating a sense of momentum.

*'[It] needs a sense of critical mass, momentum.'*

*"Movement-building takes time!"*

*'Recognise that relationships change over time.'*

*"[It's] no matter if there's no immediate return."*

Either way, networking efforts need to be adequately resourced. The funding for such efforts could come from funders, members or a mix of the two. The risks with grantmakers being the principle support for any new networking efforts is that this effort is then seen as competing with the sector. If there is a central hub, then this becomes answerable to the funders, rather than the sector — though another way to look at this is that it becomes answerable to the overarching goal of improving democracy systemically.

A membership model where members of the network chip into a central kitty (either to fund a central hub or to be parcelled out for tasks shared across the network) was mooted with several interviewees: some were optimistic that their organisations would contribute to this, others were more doubtful. The group

would need to decide whether the networking efforts would then simply be focused on the paying members, or whether it would aim to serve all the sector, contributing or not.

Given the sector's size, a kitty raised by the members may need to be matched in some way by funders in order to be significant enough to make a difference. It may take time to grow any member-funded model, thus startup funding from grantmakers may be necessary in any case.

One interviewee suggested that a membership model was best for delivering the 'boring stuff':

*'For small, research-based wins... membership is a better route to this than funders, who want sexy stuff.'*

## How will we know whether it's useful?

Greater sharing, coordinating or collaborating can be assumed to have value in themselves, but ultimately the idea is to improve democracy. As has been mentioned, measuring progress is already a problem for the sector. If progress could be shown, then attributing an element of that success to networking efforts may be harder still.

The lesson from networking efforts in other sectors appears to be that individual case studies of success are the only way to show impact. For example, a case study might show how collaboration on a particular consultation, by two organisations connected by the networking efforts, resulted in a policy win.

If the intermediate outcome is to 'better network the sector', then this can be shown by regular social network mapping and surveying of members. A range of assumptions about the benefits of a network could be tested, such as:

- One year after setting up a mailing list and regularly introducing new people, the annual social network map will show a more densely connected and wider sector;
- One year after creating an open map of the sector, a survey will suggest that members of the sector have a 'better understanding of who else is working on related issues';
- After a year of collaborating on a handbook of research and resources, the survey will suggest that 25% of members have used resources they found in the handbook;
- After a year of quarterly Zoom calls, the survey will show that directors of organisations will feel 'better connected'.

## Risks and mitigation

It is worth considering what could go wrong with any attempt for greater networking in the sector — and how to mitigate such risks.

The underlying reasons behind a lack of collaboration discussed at the start of this document may remain — and new efforts could thus fail to result in greater networking. To counter this, efforts should be light touch to begin with, ideally requiring little from members but offering much. The approach should be to try several low cost things at once, test what works, but also to give a decent shot at it, recognising, as many interviewees did, that this will take time. The networking efforts should build up a track record of being useful over time and build a library of case studies.

The risk of 'faux collaboration' was mentioned by a couple of interviewees:

*'All too often the idea or project is already set and then other partners are called in for the purpose of being seen to be collaborative or covering an area of work the primary organisation is unable to do.'*

To mitigate this, efforts to build trust and to better map others in the space could give people the awareness, opportunity and impetus to involve each other earlier, as projects are first considered.

There's a risk that insufficient social capital, typically grown offline, results in unsuccessful online collaboration. The networking effect should prioritise informal meetings early on, as well as lightweight collaborative projects that result in quick wins. It will recognise that building trust takes time. There may be a need to shift some of the structural incentives that drive the competition that risks creating a default of low-trust.

Another risk is that of creating additional work for members. Networking efforts are likely to mean more emails and meetings, but this demand on members' time should be offset by the benefits, including time saved, by access to knowledge, connections and impact of the network as a whole. To ensure that this cost-benefit analysis remains net positive, any central hub needs to be excellent at what it delivers: the quality of the outputs needs to be good, the moderation of mailing lists needs to be rapid and effective, meetings need to be well facilitated, etc.

*'The way you get people to come to your events is by having really good food.'*

*'[Any hub] should have a service delivery mentality.'*

There is a risk that the sector is not coherent enough to organise. This could be related to thematic difference (e.g. constitutional reform vs hyperlocal journalism) or that the practices of organisations are too different (e.g. academic research vs campaigning). Part of the work in networking may be to grow the community in the

first place. Clear goals or a vision of a more democratic country, developed with the community, will help provide greater coherence over time.

A particularly serious risk is that an exclusive network is created, perpetuating unhelpful power imbalances. To mitigate this, it will be vital to make efforts to continuously expand the network at some level of engagement, bringing in new voices and new connections. The necessity of any closed or private elements of engagement should be regularly reviewed.

*'Listen to the right people early on [in the needs analysis phase]. Low-hanging fruit might be easier to bring in to any network, but that won't deliver a diverse network. Be intentional about the diversity you want, from the beginning.'*

*'There should be no domination of the group by anyone or any theme'*

Lastly, there's a risk that too great a reliance is placed on a few individuals in the network. This has been an issue for several prior attempts at networking in the sector, and may boost the argument for a central, professional hub, one that has clear long-term plans for roles and handovers (one central hub spent several years planning the handover of its highly connected leader). If the efforts are decentralised — which network theory would suggest creates a more resilient network — then it may be wise to ensure roles are divided up and spread widely. As in the OneTeamGov model, the infrastructure for the network should be 'held lightly' in readiness for another individual or group to take such efforts forward.

## 13. Conclusion

It is clear that this sector can be more than the sum of its parts. The costs of the efforts to do so are small, certainly at the 'thin' end of engagement, where only light infrastructure is required to encourage sharing of information. The greater resources required to support 'thick' engagement — providing support for coordination and collaboration — should pay for themselves through greater efficiency and effectiveness.

There are still some questions remaining, as to the shape of the sector and the right level to pitch networking efforts. These questions might warrant more research, but better to test some approaches in the real world and see what sticks. Some efforts can be made by the sector now, but more can be done to support the sector through a central resource— a 'backbone' to the network, at least to get things started.

There is much at stake, there is much to do, and the most significant benefits of better networking could take years to realise. So let's start now.

## Further reading

Cutler, S. and Fotoohi, D., [\*Taking Stock and Facing the Future: The infrastructure and resources of the UK migration and refugee sector \(Executive Summary\)\*](#), April 2020, Global Dialogue.

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Man, M., et al, [\*Collaborating for a Cause: How cause-related networks can lead to more and better philanthropic giving\*](#), March 2020, NPC.

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Pastrik, P., and Taylor, M., [\*NET GAINS: A Handbook for Network Builders Seeking Social Change\*](#), 2006, Wendling Foundation.

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[\*Our Strategy 2020-2025\*](#), The Legal Education Foundation.

[\*Unlocking Networks: The Handbook\*](#), Power to Change, Shared Assets and Social Change Agency.

[\*What we do\*](#), Ariadne: European Funders for Social Change and Human Rights.

## List of organisations interviewed

#OneTeamGov  
#NotWestminster  
38 Degrees  
Bennett Institute, University of Cambridge  
Bingham Centre for Rule of Law  
Brexit Civil Society Alliance  
Centre for the Future of Democracy  
Centre for Welfare Reform / Citizen Network  
Co-production Network for Wales  
Democracy R&D  
Delib  
Democracy Club  
Democracy Matters  
The Democratic Society (DemSoc)  
Digital Action  
ERS Cymru  
Extinction Rebellion  
Flatpack Democracy  
Fairvote  
The Federation / Noisy Crickets  
Forward Democracy  
Luminate  
Nesta  
Newspeak House  
Independent Community News Network  
Involve  
It's Our City  
Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust  
Liberty  
Make Votes Matter  
Media Reform Coalition  
mySociety  
NEON  
Netpol  
Northern Ireland Open Government Network  
Patchwork  
The Politics Project  
Transparency International UK  
Sortition Foundation  
Stand for Something  
Unlock Democracy