

Intro to Flatpack Democracy or How to Reclaim Your Council

Intro

Around the UK, something beautiful is happening: a radically new way of doing local politics is emerging. **Communities are reclaiming their councils** from the deadlock of party politics and using them to implement the projects and policies that they want to see. They do this by running as **independent councillors who seek only to represent the views and wishes of the community, and to put them into effect through the council.**

What's more, this is really not hard to do: usually **very few people vote in council elections** making them readily winnable for independents, with as little as a few months of local campaigning - and most councils don't even have enough people to stand for there to be elections at all!

Around 20 towns have realised this and are now fully run by groups of independents working together; at least another 100 are part of the way there. Inspiring examples include Frome, Buckfastleigh, Newham, Dagenham, and Portishead. In Bideford, who have reclaimed their council with the Torridge Common Ground project, it takes only 200 votes to get into the council!

Your town could be next! Use the resources in this document to learn all you need to attempt an independent councillors campaign.

Resources

Before you begin engaging with the following content, we recommend having a notebook or journal to note down your ideas and reflections. Whilst many of the activities are independent, it is also worth discussing the content and your responses with others, when possible.

1. Learning from Others (Flatpack Democracy Stories & Case Studies)

Get inspired by these pioneers from around the country.

- Videos:

1. [Flatpack Democracy in a Nutshell](#)

2. Flatpack Democracy: the New English Political Revolt

3. How to set up an Independent Town Council

- BBC Radio show: [The Spark - Flatpack Democracy](#). *Flatpack pioneer Peter Macfadyen of Frome describes how he and a group of independents took over the local council - with historic results.*
- [Newham](#) (London Borough)
- [Torrige Common Ground](#)
- [Be Buckfastleigh](#)
- [Independents for Frome](#)
- [Portishead Independents](#)
- [Monmouth](#)
- [Ideal Bradford](#)
- Interviews with Independents from around the country [here](#).
- Peter Macfadyen's [Flatpack Democracy blog](#).
- [Queen's Park Community Council](#) (the first in London)

Could your hometown be next? Of course! Well then, it's time to get organising...

2. Resources for Running your Own Council Campaign

- First things first. The UK council system is hella confusing. [This page](#) breaks down the different types of council. It might help to read this [Quick Guide to Local Government](#). Extremely useful guide for understanding the UK council system!
- [Guide to Parish and Community Council Elections](#) in England and Wales (from the Electoral Commission).
- **Facebook Group:** [Flatpack Democracy Group](#). This is a group for discussion with people wanting to stand as Independents in local elections in the UK..... using the direction and ethos of 'Flatpack Democracy' (as set out in the book of the same name).
- **Book:** [Flatpack Democracy](#). An immensely practical guide on how to reclaim your council, written by Peter Macfadyen of [Independents for Frome](#), the pioneering group of regular people who reclaimed their council and transformed the town of Frome.
- See the [Local Governments Association](#) for advice on [becoming an independent councillor](#).

- A wealth of practical resources around UK councils and being a councillor can be found at [NALC](#) (National Association of Local Councils).
- [This guide](#) provides basic information about engaging with UK councils.
- **Book:** [Flatpack Democracy 2.0](#) - Power Tools for Reclaiming Local Politics
- It might be the case that you actually don't have a local parish or community council. If so, [you can create one!](#) "Local councils are the first tier of government – they're at the very heart of the community, giving neighbourhoods a voice and helping people feel more involved in the decisions that affect them. They take localism to the next level by giving people a democratic voice that goes beyond just voting in elections. And yet, only a third of the population is covered by one." [See what happened in Queen's Park, London.](#)
- Resources on "Big Organising" or "Distributed Organising".
 1. This is the grassroots organising model used by the Bernie Sanders campaign which mobilised X volunteers to make X phone calls, emails, and X . You can apply the models and practices to your council campaigns for big results!
 2. [A wealth of incredible practical guides](#) from Blueprints for Change, particularly the [Distributed Organising Guide](#).
 3. **Article:** [Six building blocks of distributed organising](#).
- [Presentation](#) from a Surrey local group planning a 2021 campaign. [Presentation](#) from the local Extinction Rebellion group discussing a campaign. Feel free to copy / edit / adapt these to your purposes.
- This document is connected to the **Trust the People Community Transformers Programme** as a resource for the **Community Organising** module. It's a crowdsourced programme of free workshops designed to help regular people become active and confident community organisers. All are invited to join a nationwide peer support network.
- **Article:** [How to Organise a Community](#)
Practical guidance on community organising from scratch.
- **Guide:** [How to Create a Volunteer Program](#)
- **Article:** [Building a Citizens' Action Network](#) Pioneered by the Alternative UK, Citizens' Action Networks are a way for communities to go beyond local organising and create a collaborative network of local movements, organisations and key players.

- **Guide: How Reclaim Empty Buildings for Community Projects - the Climate Emergency Centre Model** Use this guide to learn how to build a self-funding Climate Emergency / Community Project Centre, which can bring together diverse groups and individuals to build solutions, relationships and resilience in the face of the Climate and Ecological Emergency. Read an [overview of the CEC project here](#).

First Steps

- Check if you have parish elections this year on **your council's website**. [This page](#) allows you to enter your postcode to check for upcoming elections.
- Find out what other elections are in your area this year - there might district and county seats up for grabs. Get onto the slack channel to find your regional group.
- Research what the council is doing now and how much difference an independent takeback would make (probably a lot!).
- You can register to stand as **individual councillor** as late as early April. A group of you may do this together, and use the text on the election ballot to name your local independents group, e.g. "Independents for Yourtown". [Government advice](#)
- An even more effective route is to **register your community group as a minor political party** ([application form here](#)). There is a cost of £150.
- The next step is launching a campaign so you actually win the election. Decide a catchy, locally focussed name (like *Be Buckfastleigh, Independents for Frome, or Torrington Common Ground, We Stand for Todmorden*). See resources above, particularly the Flatpack Democracy book.

Some More Info

1. How do you scrutinise your council to tell whether it is worth launching an independent (flatpack democracy) campaign?

The view of the flatpack democracy community is that **if councillors don't commit to represent the will of the entire community they are not good enough**.

About the independents that already claim to represent the will of the people, you can use the following question to assess them: **are they running successful participatory/consultation processes?** By successful, we mean that they have been able to reach the whole community. This is the only way to know the will of the local community - otherwise they are merely "representing" the people and it puts them in the same category as the good party councillors.

The only way for councillors to do it right is by knowing the will of the community, full stop. If they haven't implemented processes to find it out or are not up for implementing them then there are enough reasons for launching an independent campaign. Even if you have great councillors, are they using genuinely inclusive democracy to enact the will of the local people? Probably not! If you already have good independent councillors, you may offer well-facilitated community assemblies to bring them into closer contact with their constituents and XR's demands in new ways. These are the discussions you need to have in deciding whether to engage, and if so, to what extent?

The most important thing is that councillors are truly representative and prioritise participation and deliberation, responding to the will of their communities through democratic sessions. This is only true for a tiny minority of councillors - and we are hoping to change that.

You may actually find that your main town does not have an election, but outlying villages or nearby communities do (they happen at different times all over the country).

Even if you don't win, running as independents can catalyse councils to get their act together.

2. This sounds great, but what can I do if my council doesn't have elections?

- If your council has the wrong number of councillors, you can call an election with as few as 10 signatures.
- Forming a town or parish council if you don't have one.
- Build local participatory democracy and community organising structures anyway. We need these to be in place, whether or not they work with What's more: this is long-term work and the further in advance you can prepare for council elections, the better. Even if they're two years away, laying the groundwork now will stand you in good stead later.
- Pressure and petition your local council to respond to, and to utilise participatory democratic processes.

3. The defining features of Flatpack Democracy are:

- A group of individuals working together
- An ethos setting out how they work together
- A focus on local needs and action
- Informality and accessibility
- Participatory methodologies

Enlarging briefly on each of these:

A group of individuals working together

Preferably with as wide a range of ages, skills & experiences; gender and backgrounds. They may be members of political parties, but this is part of their experience, not what defines them or their decisions. An ethos setting out how they work together

All the groups that are really making a difference have some form of 'Ways of Working'. These include things like listening, empathy, a willingness to change position etc. They tend to cover both the culture of the group and the limits to what they will and will not accept.

A focus on local needs and action

The underlying ethos is that the council should facilitate action and ideas coming from the community.... Their job is to say 'yes' not 'no' and to develop 'our council' not 'the council'. The aim is to create a council which is one body amongst many in a community, with a flat hierarchy and recognition of the value of all roles and inputs.

Informality and accessibility

Ruthless removal of layers of formality and rules is a core element. Nothing should survive from the past unless there is a clear and good reason for it to do so. Anyone and everyone should feel welcomed and valued.

Participatory methodologies

At the core of decision making must be genuine participatory engagements whereby the political literacy of the community is constantly developed and they are enabled to take back control.

Representative decision making

A key skill of Flatpackery is recognising when a group of well informed people needs to make a decision. The whole community does not need, or want to be, involved in every decision.

Flatpackery is not:

- A methodology that works well in higher levels of government, especially with 'First Past the Post'.
 - Rigid. It's a constantly evolving set of experiences, to adjust and use differently as fits the community.
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