

## Evolution of London community grassroots infrastructure for citizen agency in planning & regeneration, at October 2022 Draft V4 work in progress

The built environment planning system in the UK provides statutory rights and opportunities for the public to participate in the processes of government at national, regional and local levels developing and adopting planning policies, and in the decision making process of granting or refusing planning permissions for developments. These developments range from small individual private applications through to the largest commercial and public developments. The planning processes, including the participation processes known as community engagement, are highly technical and legalistic, operated by specialist professions, as well as political at the different levels of government.

In spite of the specialised nature of the arena, the official opportunities for civic action have enabled and stimulated the growth of citizen agency at all levels – national, regional, local and neighbourhood. Grassroots groups emerged and took root all over the country in the twentieth century. These groups are founded and run by individuals in their own neighbourhoods, to respond collectively to planning actions and to develop ways to be proactive to defend and to help their neighbourhoods to evolve sustainably. In effect, grassroots groups and the hundreds of thousands of individuals who are their active members, are change agents, working together collectively in their geographical areas of mutual concern in the public realm.

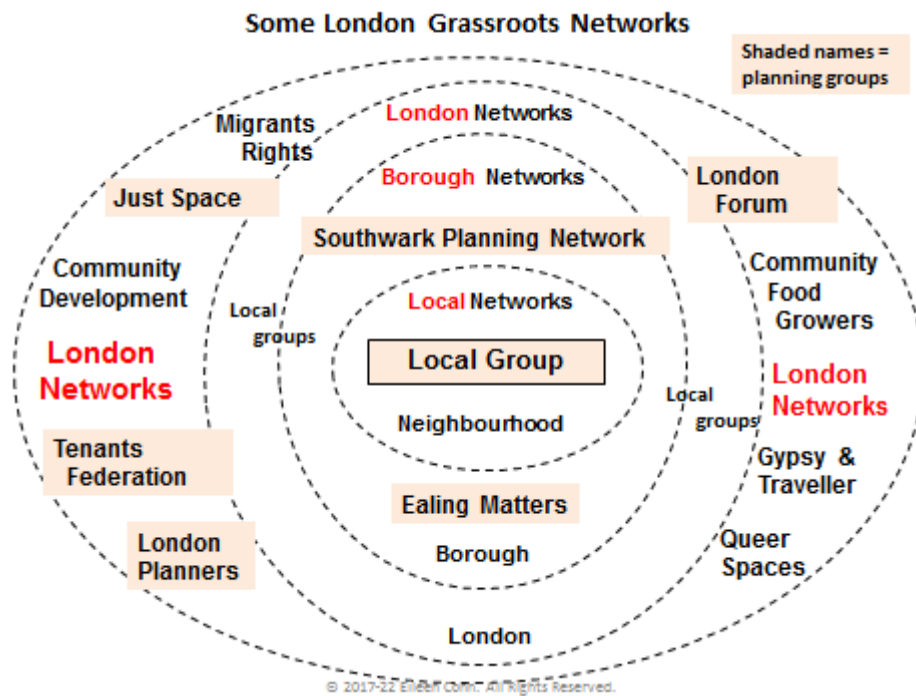
In London, the large size and scale of this social action is reflected in the growth and evolution of organisational infrastructure which supports and strengthens the grassroots groups across the different geographical and hierarchical administrative levels in the London planning process. (Similar arrangements seem to be evolving in other regions of the UK.) The nature and dynamics of this infrastructure is, like the grassroots groups themselves, self-managed by active citizens, and with similar organisational nature and dynamics. This is the *horizontal peer* system described in my paper *Community Engagement in the Social Eco-System Dance* <https://bit.ly/2yloS7b> .

The diagrams and short notes on the following pages outline some of this evolving infrastructure as at October 2022. Because this is emergent from the grassroots and not part of the formal processes, it is not in general recognised or valued by the formal structures. A challenge is to devise ways for real and useful collaboration between the formal and corporate structures, and the grassroots structures.

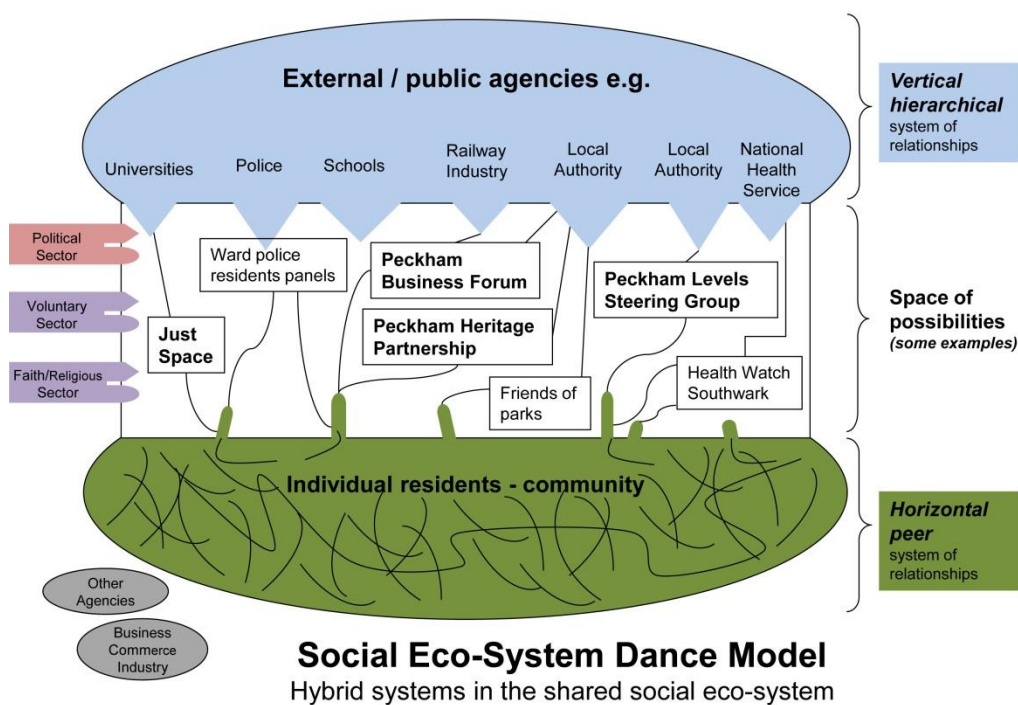
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### Links for examples of some of the grassroots structures :

- Neighbourhood - <https://www.peckhamvision.org>
- Borough - <https://bit.ly/SouthwarkPlanningNetwork-SPN>
- London - <https://justspace.org.uk>
- <https://www.londonforum.org.uk>
- National - <http://www.civicvoice.org.uk>
- <https://www.communityplanningalliance.org>

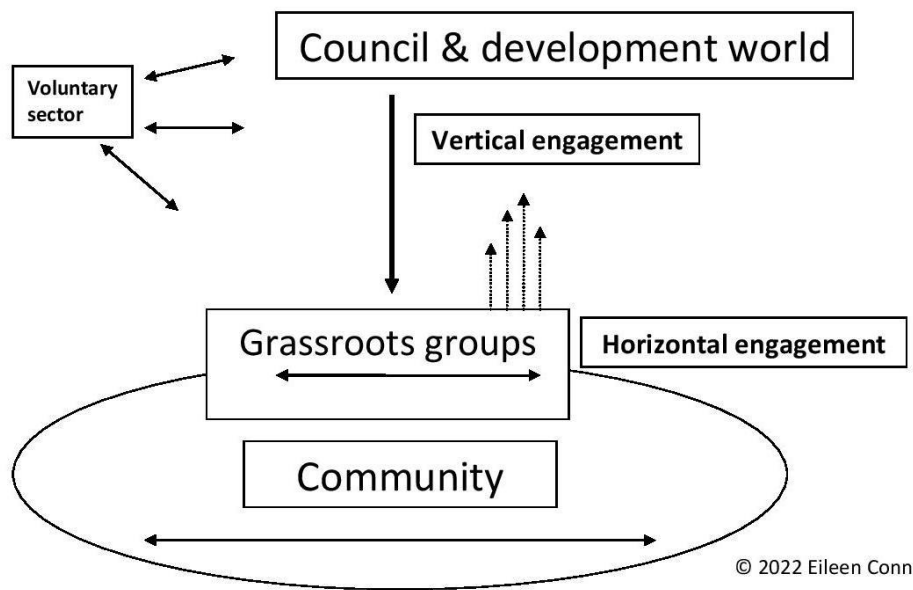


This shows the different spheres of community infrastructure in London from the street level grassroots groups through the neighbourhood and borough levels to the London level. This is like fractals in a complex system rather than levels in a top-down hierarchy. The structures are evolving and emerging from the grassroots upwards, with organisational forms and operational relationships appropriate for the *horizontal peer* system.



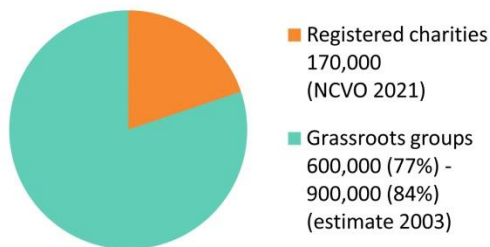
There are two distinct social systems operating in community engagement. The community is much more than 1000s of atomised individuals. We need to see it as a relational system with its own organisational structures, with the dominant mode as *horizontal peer*, which is very distinct from the transactional system of institutions, companies and registered charities where the dominant mode is *vertical hierarchical*. These differences and their implications are explained in my paper here: <https://bit.ly/2ylo57b>

**Horizontal & Vertical Engagement**  
in the social eco-system dance in local neighbourhoods

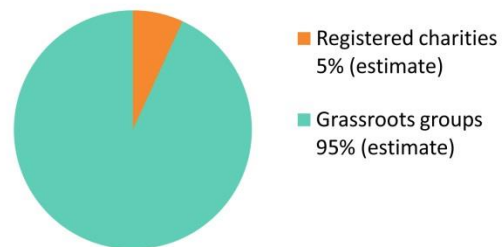


This shows the difference in engagement type with corporate top-down initiatives and bottom-up responses in vertical mode, and grassroots groups conducting their engagement with each other and local people in horizontal mode

Voluntary & Community Sector (VCS)  
in all civic action



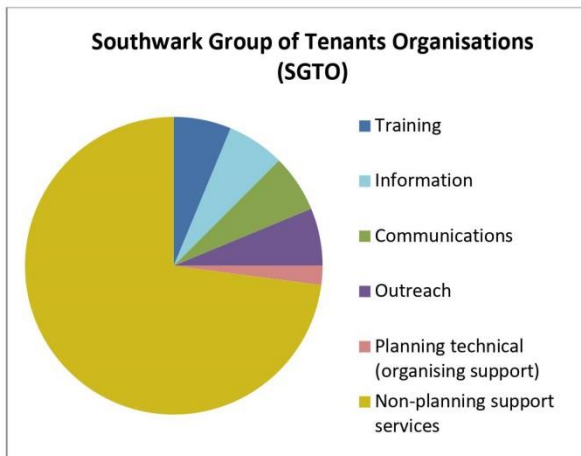
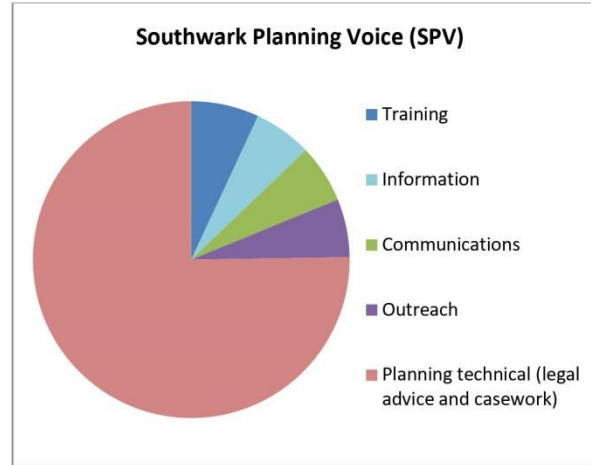
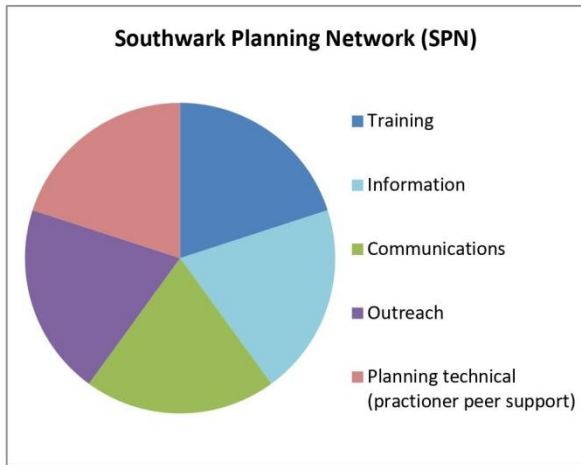
Voluntary & Community Sector (VCS)  
in local planning actions



The two systems are also present in what is known as the 'Voluntary & Community Sector (VCS)'. Registered charities operate in the transactional world as legal corporate bodies, even at borough and neighbourhood levels. They are mainly engaged in service delivery or provision for specific client groups compared with grassroots groups engaged in planning which are acting as groups of citizen agents, and not as service deliverers.

The two systems in the VCS can operate closely together in planning, as they are now in Southwark. In 2010 some community activists set up Southwark Planning Network (SPN) to connect individuals active in planning through grassroots groups to support each other by sharing information and experience. In 2017 the Southwark Law Centre – a registered charity, providing legal services to vulnerable individuals on a variety of topics, set up Southwark Planning Voice project to provide legal advice to individuals and local groups on planning. In 2018 SGTO, a small charity providing support services to Council tenants on housing matters, began to develop support on planning and regeneration impacting Council estates. The three different organisations collaborate from their different roles. This is explained on the next page.

**Community Engagement in Planning - SPN, SPV, SGTO primary roles / core functions**



**Southwark Planning Network (SPN)** - is a grassroots action group where local residents strengthen citizen agency by bringing local people together across the borough, developing peer support from community planning experience.

**Southwark Planning Voice (SPV)** - is a Southwark Law Centre project providing legal advice and casework support to local groups and individuals on planning matters that affect them and their neighbourhoods.

**Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations (SGTO)** - is an independent voluntary organisation that provides support to council tenants on housing matters that affect their collective housing interests, including planning in estate redevelopments.

Section sizes in above diagrams are indicative, not specific.

**Notes**

- The diagrams illustrate the different and complementary roles of SPN (Southwark Planning Network), SPV (Southwark Planning Voice) and SGTO (Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations).
- All three organisations have borough-wide roles. SPN and SPV core functions address the same audience across the borough i.e. all local people who are affected by planning. SGTO core functions address Council tenants only, where planning is one issue among many relating to housing.
- Supporting community engagement in planning involves all three organisations in the same tasks shown by the 5 different colours in the diagrams, but in significantly different proportions.
- For SPN, the 5 tasks are relatively equal in weight and are the core functions developed over many years of practitioner peer support, in making available grassroots community planning experience. For SPV, the core function is the provision of planning legal advice and casework, with the other tasks being integral to the support of that function. For SGTO, planning is one topic among several, where organising support has grown because of infill and rooftop developments, and estate regeneration.
- Because of the shared audiences, and similar tasks, all three organisations collaborate to identify priorities and to share delivery where appropriate.