

Internships in Transition Groups

Transition Black Isle's 2017 experience – and lessons learnt

Introduction

During the summer of 2017 Transition Black Isle (“TBI”) hosted an intern for 3 months. The idea for this came from conversations at the Transition Scotland “Get-together” held in September 2016; the aims were

- (i) to provide an opportunity for a young adult to find out more about Transition ideas and how they are implemented, at a time when they will be making important decisions about their future; and
- (ii) to help to get a substantial piece of work done for TBI.

This paper sets out what we did and the lessons learnt, with a view to informing similar projects which TBI or other Transition Groups may undertake in the future.

Who was involved?

Transition Black Isle was set up in 2009; it has around 150 members, probably half of whom are active in some aspect of the group's activities. The Black Isle is a peninsula sticking out into the Moray Firth, just north of Inverness. More information about TBI can be found at www.transitionblackisle.org.

M was the convenor of TBI at the time of the internship. He developed the idea that TBI should host an intern, and acted as the “tutor” for the internship, taking lead responsibility for the intern's management and personal development. *M* was retired; his career had been in business, giving him extensive management experience in large and small businesses.

J and his wife *L* offered accommodation to the intern in their house in Fortrose. *J* was a Director of TBI at the time, and both he and *L* were members of the group. *J* had been a consultant in the field of rural development, and *L* does academic research and teaching.

P was a student at the University of Savoie. A German native, she had been living in France for some years and was studying Applied Modern Languages. As part of her degree course she had to undertake an internship of 4 to 6 months in a country relevant to her degree – and chose to do this in the UK. She had developed an interest in the Transition Movement through the film “Demain”.

Other TBI members were also involved in chasing up directory entries, reviewing early versions of the site, helping to monitor progress, taking photos, offering social opportunities and generally being supportive.

What did we do?

In autumn and early winter 2016, *M* presented a paper to the TBI board suggesting the group should actively seek an intern. This was agreed. In December 2016, two separate French students contacted TBI

via Transition Scotland, which led us to develop concrete thoughts about a suitable project, and practical issues such as accommodation. Neither of these came to anything, but when P contacted us in February 2017 we had reasonably clear thoughts about how an internship might work.

We interviewed P by Skype in February, and offered her the internship immediately afterwards. P joined us for 3 months, from 1st June to 31st August 2017; she had already agreed to a 3-month internship with the YHA in Ambleside immediately before this. Her main work was to take an earlier TBI publication “Our Local Larder”, update it and publish it on-line. The booklet was a directory of local food resources on and around the Black Isle. The resulting website is www.blackislelarder.org.

We realised there were features of TBI which meant any internship with us would be unconventional, and at times potentially challenging, but we thought there could also be benefits from working with us.

What were the issues we identified?

Accommodation: We considered various options for P’s accommodation. J and L were willing to put her up – they have a big house, and their children have all left home – but they were going to be away for the first two weeks of the internship. J and L were happy for P to stay in their house even in their absence, but it seemed quite challenging to expect the intern to live in someone else’s house, on her own, not knowing anyone in the area. We considered a bunk house, which would have given a better social scene, but rejected that as it would be too difficult to work there. Having discussed it with P, we decided she should stay at J and L’s. *P: J and L kindly offered to host me for three months and even to have me at their place for two first weeks during their absence, without knowing me. This was quite an important proof of trust to me. I was happy to stay at their place, even alone because I found it easier than having to move from one place to another.*

Costs: When we were discussing the internship in abstract terms, before P contacted us, we thought it only fair that TBI should pay something towards the hosts’ household costs, but we never quantified that, and in the event J and L didn’t seek any reimbursement. *M: in other circumstances, this could have been an extra constraint.*

The Intern’s tasks: We put together a rough project plan in advance, but we avoided doing too much detailed planning before P arrived – because we thought it would increase her sense of “owning” the project if she did that – and we had plenty of other things to do! This could have backfired, although to some extent we were ready to limit the scope of the project if that proved necessary. *P: it might have been better if TBI would have had a more precise plan for the Local Larder project in the beginning. But in the same time, this would have given me less freedom and I wouldn't have learned how to manage a project. I think that it is important to remember that an intern is generally a “weak part” in the organisation and it is a bit risky to put too much responsibility on him/her, depending on the person. J: the Local Larder project was ambitious for an intern. P did a great job, but a less mature intern could have struggled – and however good the individual, there’s always a risk that something could go wrong (illness, bereavement, etc.). M: I thought it was important that the intern should find the work*

challenging as well as interesting, and that P would be put in situations she wasn't used to handling. There's a risk there, but I anticipated being able to support her, and possibly adjust the nature and scale of the work, to minimise the risk.

Manager/ tutor: We thought there might be time for P to get involved in other aspects of TBI's work, and she did to some extent. We planned to have one person (M) being a "tutor" – taking responsibility for the internship, being the TBI point of contact for the University, and concentrating on P's learning and personal development, whilst "managers" took control of the various work tasks. In practice that just didn't happen; some of the people who had volunteered to oversee the work found that they had less time available than they had anticipated, and the Local Larder project turned out to need almost all P's time and energy. **M:** *I really enjoyed working with P, but there were times when I felt I was responsible for her work, her social life and her personal development – which was too much for me. On the other hand, it would have been difficult to separate out the work from the personal development.* **P:** *it would have been better not to rely on one person alone to deal with the intern and the project (I know that Wendy and others helped a lot, but I am speaking in terms of supervision). Maybe have a tutor and a separate mentor role? This would also give the tutor the possibility to discuss certain issues with the mentor.*

Before the internship: We recognised that it's a big step for a young adult to commit to 3 months in a foreign country, staying with strangers. We tried to make it clear, in the interview and subsequent correspondence, the basis of the internship; this was obviously desirable anyway, but we also thought it important to demonstrate to P that we were taking the internship in a professional way, and we were serious about making it work for her as well as TBI. **P:** *I was very happy and excited when I received TBI's positive answer to my request in February and had the impression that the members of Transition Black Isle were unusually concerned about my social integration and happiness in general. This instantly gave me a very good impression of TBI and I was sure to meet very nice people on the Black Isle. The Skype interview with M, J and Anne went very well, all three were very kind and I was happy to understand their English easily.* **M:** *I'm quite surprised, looking back, that we didn't really document things as thoroughly as I thought we had. From P's comments we obviously gave a good impression, but I think we should have documented things better – the expected working hours, the relationship between intern and hosts, how she would be supervised, etc.*

The start/Getting to know each other: We recognised the start of the internship would be challenging, with lots for P to take in. We produced an induction check-list, and M went through this with P on her first day. Wendy, another TBI director, joined M and P that afternoon to discuss the work P was to do. The next day was a Saturday. We had a workshop on keeping chickens in the morning, which P attended, and then in the afternoon we arranged a little tea-party to introduce P to some of the more relevant TBI members. After that, P was left to get on with her work and explore the area. **P:** *I had hoped not to start discussing work-related things directly after my arrival in order to have a day to "arrive", to get used to the place and get an idea of how things work roughly in the organisation. We could have had a relaxed walk somewhere on the Black Isle and a chat about the organisation for*

example. It was a very nice idea to organise an afternoon tea so that I could meet some more TBI directors and members and they could get to know me. I thought that it would be something “official” where everybody would present themselves and we would talk about the aims of the internship and TBI in general. But it seemed to be more of an unconventional relaxed afternoon tea and almost felt as if everybody just came to Julian's coincidentally and ended up discussing things that they didn't have the time to discuss after the last meeting. I can't say that I would have done it differently, but from my German intern perspective, I would have been happy to learn a bit more about the people who were there as we didn't have that many occasion to meet afterwards (apart from meetings, which were focused on TBI's work).

Working with volunteers: TBI had no employees in 2017, so P's work was supervised by volunteers. This limited the amount of day-to-day input, and meant P had to be able to manage her own time, and ask for guidance when needed. We recognised this could be a problem for many under-graduates, but we thought that anyone seeking an internship with TBI would inevitably be more resourceful and motivated than a typical 20-year-old. In fact, P was in her early 30s, so that made us more confident that she would be mature enough to make the internship work. *M: I'm pretty sure we explained to P in the interview that she would need to work with little supervision, although I can't find a record of that. J: there's a risk here, particularly with a younger intern – however clearly the position is explained, it won't necessarily be understood. P: there's also a cultural difference: internships are maybe perceived differently in GB where young people tend to do internships once they have completed their university degree and are supposed to be more independent. In France and Germany, internships are perceived as an occasion to see how a business works, to learn some tasks and in some cases, to get employed by the company afterwards.*

Transport in a rural area: The population of the Black Isle is scattered. Fortrose, where J and L live, has a population of about 1,500, but there are 6 or 7 other similar-sized villages in the area, and public transport is limited, so we realised P could have difficulties getting around. Fortunately, we have two folding bikes and three electric bikes which are available for members to trial, and M and L both had bikes they were prepared to lend P, so we gave her the option to use any of those. Mostly she used one of the electric bikes to get around. This was quite successful, but it still meant P would regularly have to cycle for an hour or so to get to meetings. *M: P was very happy to get around by bike, even though it was a particularly wet summer. She saw it as an opportunity to explore the area and take photographs for the website, but in other circumstances there could have been a fair amount of unproductive time travelling around.*

Every-day life: It was difficult to provide frequent face-to-face input into P's work, because TBI's volunteers are spread across the Black Isle, and the organisation has no office. M met P to discuss progress roughly weekly, but any meeting involved either a 45-minute bike ride or a 10 mile drive each way. Possibly more importantly, any discussion of the project had to be arranged in advance, so P missed out on the chance for less formal conversations, and communication tended to be focussed on the obvious big issues. *J: L and I hadn't considered the impact on us of P not just living in our house but also working there. Even though it's a big house and we spent some time away, and although we*

enjoyed P's company, at times it was difficult having a guest around from early morning to late evening, every day. M: the first two weeks were particularly difficult in this respect, as J and L were away, so P was alone in their house. P didn't seem keen for me to come to meet her all that frequently, and I worried things were drifting. On reflection, maybe I should have arranged to work from J's house some of the time during those first few days and weeks. P: I didn't feel very productive at first, as I spent whole days at the computer and the initial research was very time consuming. Nevertheless, I felt confident that the project would be finished in time anyway, as I didn't measure how much work was still left to do. The fact that M insisted on regular meetings to discuss how the work was going, was very good. Even if it put me a little bit under pressure to show results, it reassured me in the same time, to know that he had an eye on my work.

How did things go?

TBI ended up with a fantastic new website, much better than we had anticipated, incorporating lots of P's fantastic photos, and some great video footage of local food producers and even our MSP. P's presence also energised the group more widely – it was great having a younger, energetic and gregarious person around. And the Local Larder project was much more than just P's work - other volunteers, including some who hadn't previously been so active, were involved and were drawn closer to TBI's core activities.

P learnt a lot, increased her self-confidence, and enjoyed her time on the Black Isle. There's a fuller list of things she identified as having learnt in the appendix.

So, in terms of outputs, the project was a great success. There were things that could have gone better though:

M: It seemed to me the first part of the internship was a bit tense, as P and I were nervous about the impression we were giving, and generally getting to know each other. The middle bit was good – I felt I was making a positive contribution. By that time, I was confident in P's abilities, so was happy to push her to take more responsibility than she might have expected – with very positive results. The end was pretty tense again – this time because we were approaching the deadline of P's departure, and at the same time she was working long hours to finish her University report on the internship. Overall, supervising P took much more of my time than I had anticipated, and put some pressure on other things I had to do. P: although I reached an uncomfortable level of stress in the last few weeks, that was when I learnt the most. I learned to focus on the most important things to do, to write e-mails that would be efficient, clear and polite, to insist on questions or on my point of view but in the same time to listen and to accept other's points of view. J: I'd been keen from the outset to respect boundaries by restricting my role to providing accommodation, but I felt L and I were sucked in to a mentoring role – and I also ended up giving technical assistance with some of the videos. Maybe someone else should have been nominated as a mentor at the outset? P: I didn't understand J's reluctance to speak about TBI. I found it difficult not to speak about my work and personal issues with people I live with as there is necessarily a

certain relationship of trust that appears between people living under the same roof for a while. M: on reflection, there are a number of roles for the host team – tutor, manager, mentor (which I would see as someone available to help out if needed, but not directly involved in other tasks), social organiser, accommodation provider. Depending on the individuals, some of these can be combined, but they all need to be covered. And we should have been clearer about who was covering each function. J: we were happy for P to have her boyfriend, stay with her during the internship, but that did make our lives a bit more difficult, especially when he came to stay at the end of the internship – by then we were feeling a bit that we wanted our privacy back, and having both P and her boyfriend in the house changed the dynamic and made things more complicated for us. P: three months is a long time for even the most welcoming host to have someone stay in their house! Maybe another host could have taken over part-way through. M: Communication was a bit of an issue – it almost always is, but in our circumstances, with limited face-to-face contact and lots of email exchanges, and with P speaking good English, but not as a native, there was more scope than usual for misunderstanding. I had also under-estimated the problems P would have making phone contact with local businesses – a lot of Brits freak out at the sound of a foreign accent on the phone! P: I learnt a lot from the internship – maybe too long a list for this paper, but I've set out some of the things as an appendix.

What are the lessons for TBI, the individuals involved, and other groups thinking about an internship?

Setting expectations at the outset is essential to avoid disappointment on one side or the other. That could include a better definition of the roles of host, tutor/ manager, mentor, etc. – but in practice these will depend on how relationships between the intern and the host group develop, so they need to be flexible.

A good plan for the first one or two weeks is very important- and it needs to ensure the intern is introduced to lots of people, and shown around the area, as well as being introduced to their work.

Supervising an intern is quite hard work, and potentially very intense – combining the roles of manager, tutor, friend and social secretary! Splitting the manager and tutor roles could be difficult, but having someone specifically responsible for making sure the intern is meeting people and getting opportunities to enjoy her time off would be an easy way to reduce the load on the tutor/ manager.

A self-contained project is important, although in our case it would have been better if there hadn't been so much time pressure.

Deciding the duration is difficult. In some ways a longer internship would have been better as it takes a while to establish working and social relationships, and things may have been less intense if spread over a longer period. However, a longer period would make the relationship between intern and host more difficult; maybe two months is the maximum sensible stay with one host.

A closer geographical relationship between tutor and intern would help, especially in the early stages. There may be ways round that – possibly finding another volunteer who could offer a room as an office, and having tutor and intern work together there, for some of the time at least.

Having hosts who provided accommodation and company, but aren't closely involved in the work is important.

We wondered whether having two interns at the same time might be less stressful – the two interns would support each other, but on the other hand they would each get less input from the tutor.

There needs to be a reasonable number of people in the host team who are able to help show the intern around – and introduce her/ him to others outwith the group. As noted above, it might be a good idea to nominate a volunteer to take overall responsibility for the social side of things.

It's important that the tutor takes sufficient responsibility for developing the intern's skills – it's an essential part of the bargain, you can't just get the intern's work without giving something back. The mentor should discuss how this is going with the intern to ensure it's working out and whether any changes are necessary.

The outlook of the intern is also critically important. They need to be willing to try things, interested in the work, happy to function with limited supervision. Some of these things are difficult to ascertain in an interview! As a result, a high degree of flexibility is always going to be necessary to respond to the intern's skills and needs.

Conclusion

We knew at the outset that it was going to be challenging for a voluntary group with no members of staff, no premises, and a scattered rural population to host an intern. In fact, it was a bit more challenging than we had expected, but the rewards were also greater. We would encourage other Transition Groups (and TBI itself) to consider hosting an intern (or another for TBI!) – but not to underestimate the difficulties, put lots of time into planning, and identify a strong host team with the expertise and time to do justice to the project and honour the commitment of the intern.

October 2017

APPENDIX

Here is a short list of the things I learnt during my internship with TBI.

- I could see how a Transition Group works in practice and this made me reflect about the difficulties but also about the positive outcomes that can result from the work of a voluntary body. I am not sure if I can say that I learned how a classical Transition Group works, as TBI is a rather independent group in the sense of working methods from what I have understood. The plans that Rob Hopkins has imagined for a Transition group (to start with a vision, the Energy Descent Action Plan...) are not compulsory, so it would be interesting to see the difference between a group that uses the Transition Handbook very much and a group that improvises and does what it thinks is right for the area/people's needs and so on.
- I learned how group meetings are held in an organisation and that there are necessary "official" procedures that trace what has been discussed/ decided during the meeting, who was present etc. For future interns, I think that it could be interesting to explain why these papers are needed, how they are supposed to be presented, if they need to be made available to governmental bodies and other facts.
- I also learned to prepare papers for discussions and decision-making and to "take meeting minutes". It was a good experience to get used to speaking in front of a group and to defend my point of view. I realised how important it is to be well prepared for a meeting by gathering information and ideas so that less time needs to be spent during the meeting for this.
- I have learned to delegate tasks to other volunteers when I needed help.
- The fact that I had to communicate a lot with people I didn't know much in the beginning but whom I got to know better by the time, increased my self-confidence and my communication skills in general I think. In the beginning, I hesitated a lot and re-read my e-mail several times before sending them. Later, I was able to focus on the most important points I needed to get through and trusted myself much more in terms of English phrases, polite expressions and grammar.
- I also learned not to take e-mails too personally when they are linked to work (but still need to work on that). Just like me, people don't always have the time to choose the right words when they try to get a message through and I think that it is important sometimes not to measure every word when reading as well as writing.
- I learned to make requests, which is rather difficult for me. I tend to think that it is easier to do things by yourself than to ask for help. I am also too shy and polite sometimes, so that I don't necessarily get what I need as people tend to forget or think that it is not so important. And it is even more difficult to have to insist when people forget your request or say that they don't have the time. (I am thinking about the different businesses which didn't reply easily to e-mails, didn't send their presentation texts and pictures etc.).