Organisational Change Case Study

Mobile Apothecary
London, UK

Restorative Wholeness

Mobile Apothecary Internal Systems and Processes Project

Report

Sept 2021-June 2022

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Introduction

The Mobile Apothecary (MA) is a mobile street service based in Bethnal Green, London, that offers herbal remedies for low income members of the community, in particular for individuals experiencing homelessness.

The Initial Mobile Apothecary Idea

The idea for the Mobile Apothecary (MA) arose in 2018. Shumaisa Khan organised an event between 'Phytology' ('Bethnal Green Nature Reserve', London) – where she had worked over a few months - and 'Herbalists without Borders'. The event included one of her medical herbalist friends, Rasheeqa Ahmed. The idea was to create opportunities for people to learn about herbal remedies through harvesting and making the remedies together, thus also connecting people with one another and with the land in the process. Additionally, the medicines were to be distributed to people in need.

Shumaisa suggested that Elecampane, a plant which was abundant at Phytology at the time and is used as cough medicine, could potentially be harvested for use in Calais. Consequently, this is what then happened.

MA Evolves to Being More Local

One of the people who had attended the event and who worked for a homelessness organisation suggested doing the same kind of activity to support unhoused people locally. Through this suggestion, the idea of offering a **local street service for low income and homeless members of the Bethnal Green community** emerged.

This led to the development of the Mobile Apothecary in its more current form.

The MA's first local street service took place, around March/April, 2019, outside Bethnal Green tube station.

MA Members & Bike-cart outside Bethnal Green station, London
Image credit: Michael Smythe

Initially a wheelbarrow was used to transport the products which were offered from a table. Within a couple of months the team secured a bike-cart (see image), and there was now no need for the wheelbarrow/table combination.

At this initial local phase the three key outward activities of the MA were:

1) Plant harvesting	2) Medicine Making	3) Street Service
- at the Phytology Herb garden, led by Shumaisa Khan	- workshop sessions in Bethnal Green, to produce medicines from the harvested plants. This was under the guidance of Rasheeqa Ahmed (qualified medical herbalist). The Pay As You Feel (PAYF) fee for this also helped income generation for the MA.	- plant-based medicines produced at the workshop sessions were transported in the bike-cart and offered for free to low-income individuals of the local community, especially the homeless.

The above three concrete activities continued to fulfil an important aspect of the original intention: to provide opportunities for education, connection to the land and to the different people involved with the project, i.e. for the volunteers and service users, to connect with each other.

Background Leading MA to Seek Support for it's Internal Functioning

About one year after the initiation of the MA street service, certain challenges arose, in particular navigating the **COVID-19 pandemic** coupled with associated **lockdowns** (2020+).

Related to this, the project had chosen to spread itself over three areas in London, expanding beyond the original, single, Bethnal Green focus.

Also, the regular medicine-making sessions (at Bethnal Green) had now ceased; and meetings, that had previously taken place in-person, were now taking place over zoom - to briefly give examples of some of the changes and challenges.

Additionally, while the MA had drawn passionate new volunteers, capacity would vary over time. Also, some people had dropped out, and the group began to acknowledge that there was **growing tiredness and a feeling of disconnect**. There was also a lack of clarity as to the direction of the MA.

Image credit: Michael Smythe

The above, coupled with other factors, led to the MA **seeking an external entity to support it to revisit its processes and structures**, essentially so it can work better internally.

On recommendation from a couple of people, Michael Smythe, one of the early members, reached out to myself. I then had several video calls with Michael. Later, I also had an in-person meeting in London with both Michael and Onyeka Igwe (who had become active within the MA from spring 2020). (The outcomes from these meetings were communicated with other MA members, through the MA's communication channels, where responses were invited).

Key Higher Level Goal

From these meetings, the **key higher level goal** was agreed in terms of my involvement:

> **i.e. to *help catalyse the Mobile Apothecary to function more wholesomely and coherently internally*.**

My Role and Approaches drawn on

My role: centred primarily on being a **facilitator/catalyst**.
My approach:

- **draw out information** regarding key internal aspects of the MA;
- **holding space** for members to reflect and dialogue, so the information can be digested and integrated;
- for the MA to discover its own **solutions** through the process;
- occasional ideas or reflections offered by myself for the MA to consider, where that could be of value. The MA would choose for themselves whether they wished to take on any ideas suggested.

There were **several approaches** important to acknowledge that I found myself tapping into to varying degrees, based on trainings, research and/or experience I had had over the years. These included *Social Permaculture Design*, *Consensus-Decision-Making*, *Sociocracy*, *Process Work*, and *Journeywork*.

The Five Process Steps

The full process that led to the formation of this report is captured in the five key listed steps below. These five steps are then expanded somewhat underneath.

- **Step 1:** *Exploratory Conversations*
- **Step 2:** *Six volunteer interviews over video call*
- **Step 3:** *Collation of information gathered and Mapping*
- **Step 4**: *In-Person Gathering Day*
- **Step 5:** *Follow-up video call with MA Core Group*

More expanded information about each of the five steps is now described:

1) Exploratory Conversations *(Sept 2021-Nov 2021)*

I had three video calls with Michael Smythe, and an in-person meeting with both Onyeka Igwe and Michael Smythe in London, as touched on earlier.

The functions of these calls and the in-person meeting were to:

- draw out **background information** about the MA
- identify the **needs** of the MA, and **expected outcomes** from the project
- to clarify the extent to which I would be able to **meet those needs**
- identify and agree on the **steps** I would take to get there, along with expected **time-frames** for each step/phase

2) Six volunteer interviews over video call *(Jan-Feb 2022)*

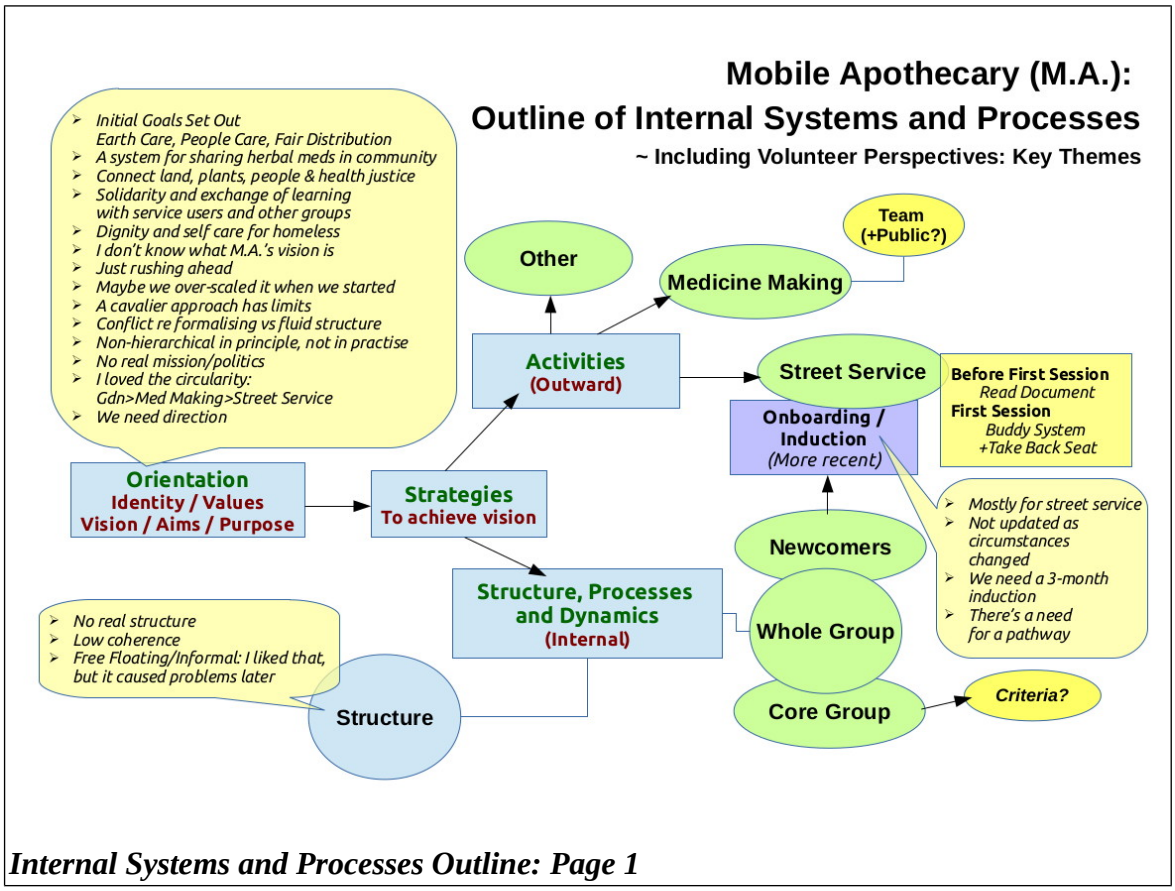
Six MA members (current or former) each kindly took part in a 1.5 hour interview with myself over video call. The aim of these interviews was to draw out individual experiences as to **what it was like being part of the group**, in particular **what was working well**, and **what was working less well, internally**.

The criteria, as to which members and former members to prioritise in reaching out to for interview, was essentially defined as: those who had been involved with a range of different MA activities for a significant period of time, whether they were current or past members.

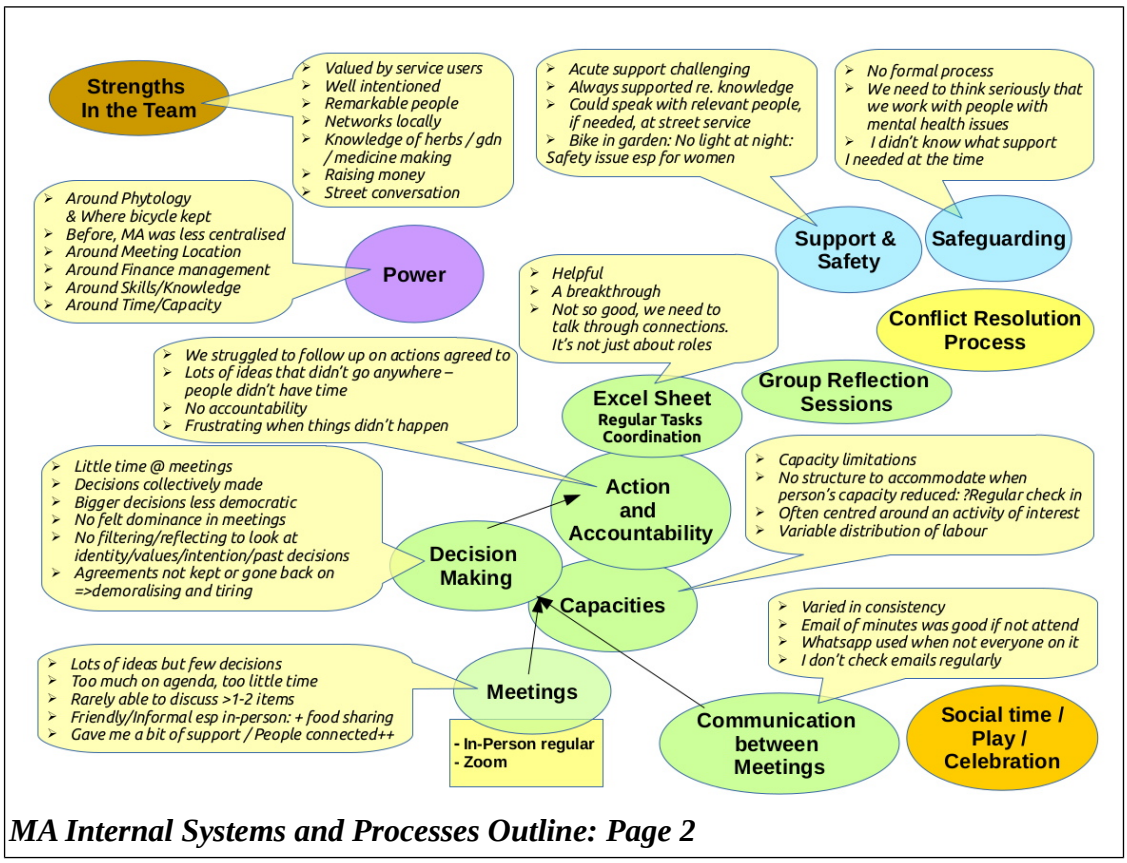
3) Collation of information gathered and Mapping

Information from the interviews and preliminary conversations related to the internal aspects of the MA gathered was collated. The form this took was as quotes and paraphrased comments. These collated quotes and paraphrased comments were then condensed into a **short summary**.

A core function of this summary was to capture the key themes and perspectives shared by the volunteers interviewed. The fruits of this process was a two page **internal map** (of the MA's Internal Systems and Processes). See below:

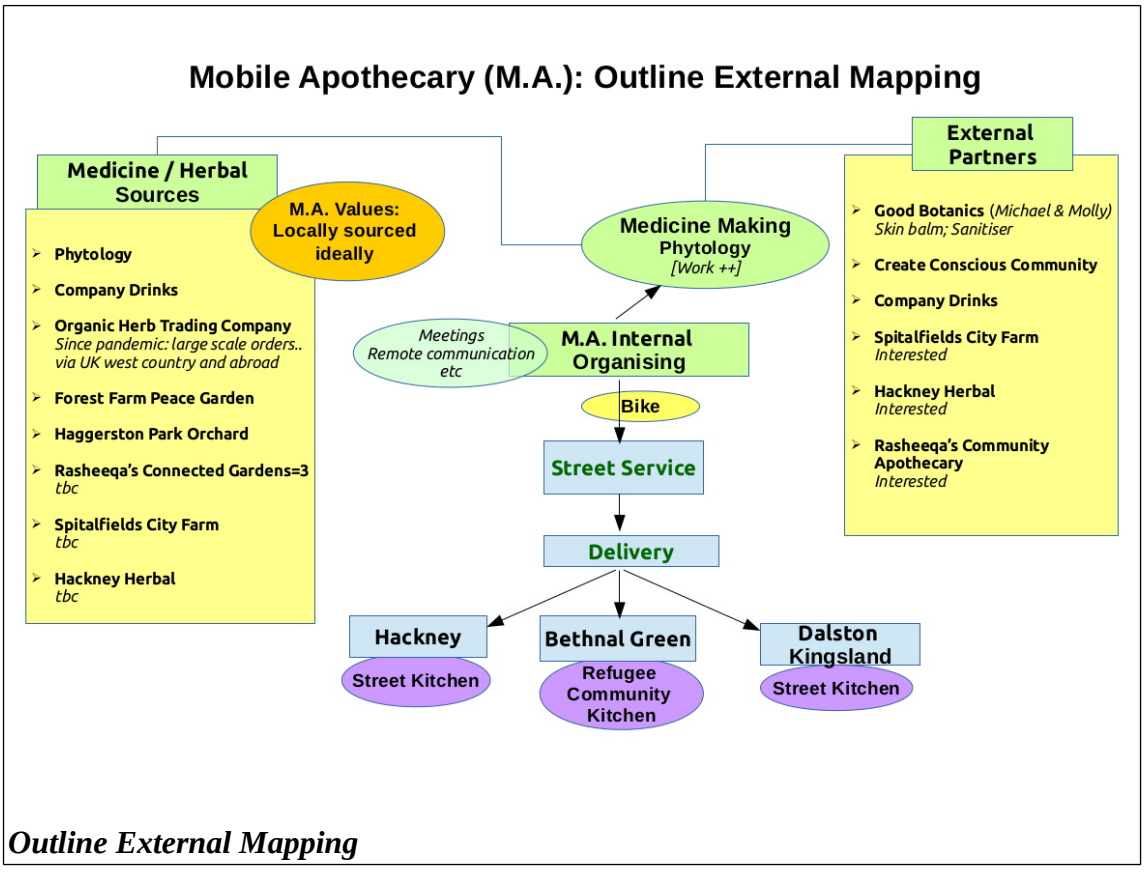


Internal Systems and Processes Outline: Page 1



MA Internal Systems and Processes Outline: Page 2

Additionally, below is a basic *external* mapping diagram:



Outline External Mapping

4) In-Person Gathering Day *(29th April 2022)*

Mobile Apothecary In-Person Day

The purpose of the in-person day was to collectively reflect on the key information gathered and look at how the MA can move forwards.

A) Who and When?

All key existing and past MA members were invited to the In-Person Gathering. This included all of the people who had been interviewed, as well as members who were more new.

While six people initially stated they would be able to attend, the number halved, dropping to three, a couple of days before the gathering, due to unexpected responsibilities arising.

Despite the drop in numbers, we still decided to go ahead rather than attempt to change the date. From my perspective, finding the 'right' date could lead to a delay of several weeks, and a similar issue of people dropping out closer to time could still re-occur (especially as capacity had been one of the areas commonly articulated as a limitation within the interviews).

Additionally, the interviews had quite comprehensively captured wider voices within the MA, and the condensed, mapped summary of these interviews would be shared, reflected on, and discussed at this in-person day. This would enable the wider voices to be integrated, thus helping inform how the group could move forward to meet the agreed higher level goal, even though several people would not have been physically present.

The fuller documented information from the interviews would also be made available on the day, as a hard copy, for participants to refer to if and as wished.

The day itself lasted from 10am-6pm, with breaks. The MA members who were able to attend this gathering were Michael, Mila and Chiara.

B) The Process

[The steps below are a very brief, outline summary that, for the sake of brevity, do not include all the exercises and processes that the group went through.]

Visual capturing of participant contributions
Photo credit: Michael Smythe

Qualities invited at the gathering included *authenticity*, *connection*, and *spaciousness*, with room for the possibility of something new.

My intention in this time together was for us to **initially go broad**: to put our attention onto key information revealed over the last few months - and to begin to digest and integrate it.

The group was invited to check in with themselves and share **how they felt** hearing and reflecting on this gathered information from the interviews that we slowly read out together.

With the quality of spaciousness, this gently led the group to collectively identify **key areas that needed attention** within the MA.

These areas were then collectively prioritised by the group, and **concrete steps** were identified so the group could move towards meeting the higher level goal: i.e. for *the MA to function more wholesomely and coherently internally*.

Observation, Group Mind, and Collective intelligence

This **'Observation'** (a permaculture principle) of the *social landscape,* as described above, takes time, but helps to establish a **group mind,** which in my experience is an essential foundation for meaningful collective-decision-making.

Participant's activity to prioritise themes identified

The group is then much more attuned to what is

happening and what is needed. It can address those needs with greater fluidity and a **collective intelligence** activated. Thus, while the process does start slow, my experience is that it moves in a spiral-like pattern, with things gradually accelerating in an organic way once the foundational collective awareness is established.

Another dynamic that we explored was that of any unspoken **roles** people may have stepped into in the day-to-day workings of the MA, that sat beneath the more obvious visible actions. By bringing awareness to any such role, and consciously giving it a voice, the group was able to gain further awareness of itself. This also helps to loosen attachment to more automatic patterns, and thus begins opening up options for other patterns of collaborating together to also be considered and stepped into.

Themes and emerging questions

Within the above process, the group identified **themes** they noticed. The group considered which themes were a **priority** for the MA to give attention to. They were then asked to identify any **foundational questions** in relation to the prioritised themes identified. These foundational questions are in the table below:

<table>
<tr><td>1) Structure [of MA]:
What is it
Roles
Decision Making
Power within each/all roles
Scale</td><td>2) How many people/Who have [has] capacity, willingness, enthusiasm to be part of the MA?

+ How local/what capacity?</td></tr>
<tr><td>3) How is anyone held accountable to/for the role(s), responsibility(ies) and power they hold?</td><td>4) What is the scale of MA's vision?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">5) What is the criteria/mechanism for removal from core group?</td></tr>
</table>

Visible Shifts

From looking into these questions, an important key shift that took place for the MA was the formal identification of a **core group** (from Qu 1). Qu. 5, which followed the formation of the core group then came up later. The core group, agreed at this gathering, comprised two of the three attendees. The gathering also led to the beginnings of creating **criteria and expectations**, so it could be clear who in future could become a member of the core group.

An additional key shift (related to Qu. 4 in the table) was an agreement that the MA be **constrained geographically** in terms of its outward activities – thus to shrink from three locations back to one.

The Power of Objection

When any proposal emerged from within the group, anyone was free to object to it. Indeed, any felt objections were welcomed, as the basis behind any objection can help provide a perspective that may have been overlooked and that, if integrated, could improve that proposal. The group would thus move forwards with greater wisdom. This positive and constructive relationship with objections is captured both in certain consensus-decision-making processes and in sociocracy.

5) Follow-up video call with MA Core Group *(3rd June 2022)*

Later, there was a follow-up video call, just over a month after the in-person gathering. Attending this video call with myself were the two members of the MA core group, Michael and Mila.

Here are some key updates from the core group follow-up call:

- **A 'Systems and Structure' document** was now being led by Mila and developed by the core group, to include a proposal for different meeting types and anticipated frequency. Once drafted, this would be circulated more widely for feedback.

- **The decision to constrain the MA to a single geographical region** was proving helpful.

i.e. A daisy picking event, that otherwise would have happened in another borough, by being constrained to Bethnal Green, was easier to organise. Also, more people who already volunteered locally at the Phytology garden participated. This helped re-affirm the importance of staying local to safeguard energy and increase accessibility.

Image credit: Michael Smythe

From a **permaculture perspective**, the idea of '**zoning**' is relevant here, i.e. elements, or indeed events, as here, are placed in an intentional way according to the degree of human attention needed. By drawing more existing volunteers to this event, by virtue of the fact that it is nearby, support arrives more easily and 'energy' is kept within the 'system'. Relationships are nurtured which potentially opens up further opportunities over time.

Also, this single change of focus according to location, touches on the permaculture principle of '*Make the least change for the greatest effect'.* i.e. This single adjustment could potentially contribute to multiple beneficial effects within the system.

One specific benefit that is also worth mentioning relates to '**capacity'**. This frequently came up as a limitation throughout the interviews, and is particularly relevant where there are volunteers. i.e. Capacity can rise and fall much more easily. A firm geographical constraint and less dispersal of energies would more easily allow the MA to function within changing capacities, which would support the sustainability and positive evolution of the group. It also makes it's identity much clearer and more stable, and it is thus easier for potential newcomers to decide if they wish to join it.

- Also raised was a question as to how to collaborate with **a diversity of perspectives, and how to resolve difference**. My suggestion was for group members to take the initiative of engaging in workshops/trainings in these areas. I was asked and agreed to send a list of resources in this area, which I followed up on.

Some other ideas were touched on, either raised by the core group or by myself, included:

- **The Sociocracy slogan with regards to finalising a proposal**:
  "Is it good enough for now?"
  "Is it safe enough to try?"

For a proposal to be considered through this lens of, is it *'good enough for now/safe enough to try'* typically first requires a process of gathering and integrating information. That way, any proposal is thus based on some valid foundation in the first instance.

Once consent is given by the group for a proposal, it is also helpful to agree on a future *review* date where it can be *evaluated as to the* success of *implementing* the proposal.

The *review* will draw out new information. This helps the proposal to be tweaked, adapted etc. Thus there is a built-in mechanism for continual improvement as new information comes in and is integrated into the system.

Therefore a plan may not need to be perfect or fully detailed. Feedback can come through based on implementing a basic, but thought through, *good enough for now/safe enough to try* plan that gets something reasonably functional moving, and which can improve and be refined further over time.

Image credit: Michael Smythe

Related to this, is the **permaculture principle**, **'Use small and slow solution'**. In any living system, we don't know the exact consequences that our actions will have, and thus it makes sense, in general, to make small changes that can be tweaked and adapted as feedback is sought and comes in.

Final Words

- From supporting the MA with this project it seems clear that the MA provides a much appreciated service within the local community, the effects of which no doubt ripple out beyond that community. From my perspective, it was a pleasure and honour to have a role in this project.

- The steps that have been completed as documented in this report have been intended to **kick-start core changes and activate patterns** that form part of the identity of the MA, and thus will, I hope, continue to support the MA to function more wholesomely.

- As things unfold further, the **foundation questions** from the MA in-person gathering could be kept on the radar and revisited. New questions that need answering will also emerge over time.

- My sense is that an important key set of components that will continue to support the MA to function more wholesomely are:

  - **Reliable feedback systems,** and
  - **Space for the MA to reflect and dialogue on feedback**, that also takes into account **power dynamics**.

- While my involvement has come to an end for this particular agreed focus, I am also open to being invited to offer support in future if felt by the MA that it could be helpful.

Further Evaluation and Update

A further evaluation call took place at the end of November 2022, almost six months after the initial follow-up video call in June. This was again with Michael and Mila, and was after the project had formally come to an end.

On this call, the following was conveyed:

- The MA had a clearer vision and focus. It had a clearer sense of what it's remit was and was not.

- There was also more clarity in terms of its systems, structures and processes which meant new volunteers had clearer expectations. It has also meant improved safeguarding for the volunteers.
- The setup also felt more stable, with more capacity now for discussion
- Former volunteers are stepping back in
- One of the felt challenges with now having clearer systems is ensuring there is functionality without unnecessary bureaucracy
- The project feels very rewarding for the core team!

About the Author: Muzammal Hussain

Muzammal Hussain is a Facilitator and Permaculture Designer centred especially on social permaculture design and organisational change.

Muzammal has also completed numerous trainings and applications in community building and conflict transformation, including intensives in Process Work. He has advised a range of organisations, such as mainstream NGO's as well as radical cooperatives, and is a Board member of Peace News. He also has an MA in Environment, Development & Policy, and has helped in homeless hostels.

Muzammal is also a qualified medical doctor and has worked in NHS psychiatry over more than 12 years. Additionally, he is an experienced, and practising Emotional Breakthrough Therapist at Restorative Wholeness, working with individuals with anxiety, mood and trauma issues.

Additional Image Credits

Front cover image: Michael Smythe
Mobile Apothecary stand photo (p2): Michael Smythe