



The software description for the PlaNet Diss project

FROM GARY ALEXANDER, DECEMBER 2023

Preface

We are in the process of building PlaNet Diss, a pilot project for a local sustainable and collaborative community, based in and around Diss, Norfolk, UK. We see this as a contribution to a huge number of practical projects and a growing vision around the world, building a movement to provide solutions to humanity's deepest environmental and social problems.

We see our starting point as a social model of what such a community would be like and how it would work. See separate document "[The social model for the PlaNet Diss project](#)" (linked here or see my website: <https://earthconnected.net>) We are running a series of events to build a community that shares that vision.

From the social model document:

Very many of us see the main economic and political structures around us as literally insane: destructive of people and the natural world, not leading to a 'good life' for most. We are looking for and building the beginnings of a society that actually works: that protects the natural world, provides a modest but comfortable living for all, rather than wasteful throwaway consumption, people doing jobs they like on a basis of trust and integrity, and especially, where people of all backgrounds treat each other well and live in relative harmony.

We see this happening from the bottom up, not the top down. It isn't a matter of waiting until sympathetic governments get elected, and certainly not a matter of overthrowing anything. The early steps, as in this project, will start with a small group of people, perhaps a few per cent of the local population. For them, it will provide a modest improvement in their lives, but mainly will allow us to learn the skills of doing it: how to coordinate a bottom-up, self-governing community, how to organise to provide some of the basics of life and in so doing provide some local employment, how to work on a basis of trust and respect, how to build a community-based exchange system that reduces people's dependence on external money.

A core part of that vision is software support, including a local social network, that provides a framework and scaffolding for the social model and makes it easier for people to build it. But much more than supporting the social model, we are building a communication system that supports people, rather than preying upon them, and which is really safe: no anonymous accounts or rampaging bots, all discussions well moderated, no trashing of people.

We are starting by using existing software, as a proof of concept as we begin to build the community, but recognise it will be far from ideal. Thus at the same time, we are exploring what a specially designed software system would be like, and are beginning to specify it and seek partners to develop it.

For people and planet: The core unifying values in this emerging social vision are *caring for people and the natural world*, coming from our deepest sense of identity: we see ourselves as part of the human family which is in turn part of the family of life on Earth, all totally interdependent, all literally related as one family. We see looking after people and planet as looking after our larger self: that of which we are a part, that which is necessary for our survival.

This is the latest, and probably the final attempt I will make at making this vision happen, as I am now in my 80s. I see the current world situation and growing zeitgeist as uniquely suitable for its success, much more so than at any previous time in my life. It builds on earlier attempts.

Planetmakers Platform: The beginnings of this attempt stem from an application in 2019 to obtain a €1 million EU prize. It failed, but in it our social vision reached – more or less – its present

form. See our [our EU Prize application](#) for details. Also, as part of it, we built a ‘proof of concept’ software prototype, built largely around the Discourse discussion system, supported by a Wix website.

The Fair Green Green Green Fair: Then in May 2023 we held a ‘Green Fair’ in our town, to build the vision locally. See [our report on the results here](#). For this we revised the Wix website, now called [PlaNet Diss](#), and replaced the Discourse discussion system with one based on Discord. That is our present situation: our Discord server has 34 members but no activity.

The Green Living Day: The current step, in preparation now, will be a ‘Green Living Day’, to be held in Spring 2024 in a ‘new community space in the heart of Diss’: [No 8 Marketplace](#). Its purpose is to “come and get a taster of sustainable living, with local food, entertainment, small group workshops, and more... Help us map out and start more sustainable living for Diss”. (See separate document, in preparation.)

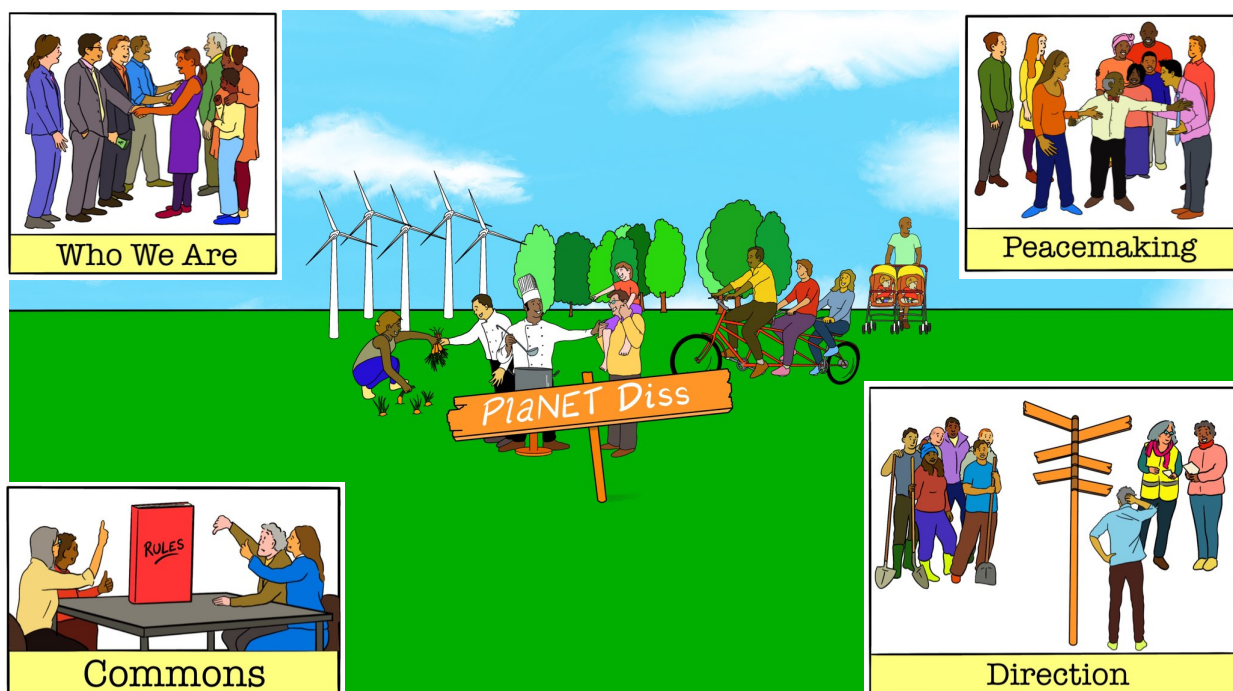
The Green Living Day will be a family day with various stalls and entertainment, but will also include planning discussions and prototypes of community infrastructure that form a key part of sustainable living:

- a) a communication system that incorporates a local social network (PlaNet Diss), as described in this document
- b) a Community Fund and Exchange System that allows people to earn and save money by dealing with people they know and trust. (document still in progress)
- c) a Peacemaking group that offers training in communication skills and support for handling conflicts constructively. (document to come, but preliminary discussions held).

This document is meant to start discussion on the communication system, so we learn of its strengths and weaknesses.

The software support

The purpose of the software is to connect the members of PlaNet Diss in various ways, but especially, to act as a scaffolding for the social vision. The members will be interacting in various ways as in the final picture in the Social Vision document, below (exchanging, getting information about other members, seeking resources for handling conflicts, taking part in the self-governance, and planning.)



In fact, this picture, or some equivalent, *could be the opening screen*, reminding members of the overall social model and enabling them to access the various parts. Ideally it would give single sign on to all of them.

The early, proof-of-concept version

This might be made up of several different applications, and there would need to be some way of arranging for a single sign on for them all and easy switching between them. (In the previous Discourse version, we managed to provide much of the functionality use Discourse alone.)

Our starting points are: the [PlaNet Diss Wix website](#), the PlaNet Diss Discord server for discussions (accessed through the Wix website), the [New Common Sense video](#), and various documents. I also have an account with [Meet.coop](#) that gives me a [BigBlueButton](#) system for group video discussions on a website, that looks quite good, and I have a paid Zoom account. However, Discord also offers audio and video discussions.

Overall, the software needs to provide

- An offers and wants system. It will be linked to an accounts system for payments as early as possible but perhaps not from the start.
- Discussion facilities for many purposes: for sub-groups, for planning events, etc. This should include asynchronous text discussions, but also audio and video discussions.
- Easy access to various documents, which will sometimes be collaboratively edited by a group. (That could include this one as a trial.)
- A polling system for people to vote on proposals, rules, procedures, etc. with the voting often restricted to specified groups and perhaps only visible to those groups.
- A database of members, including individuals, businesses and organisations. This would function as a local 'green directory', that promotes acting with integrity, quality, and sustainability. It should include two parts:
 1. fields for the members values as well as other personal description, and
 2. their links to the community. (In our Discourse prototype we were planning to use badges to mark contributions to the community.) As early as possible there should be a way of indicating a basis of trust, and a way of finding out trust links (i.e. X is trusted by Y who is trusted by Z whom I trust).
- An accounts system, linked to a community fund. (See separate document, in preparation.)

Going through the various parts of the overall picture above, they will contain:

Synergy (exchange system): offers and wants can initially use a basic discussion system (think of FaceBook marketplace, or Freecycle/Freegle for example) and later something more suitable. A possible alternative is to locally colonise [Olio](#). (Note that these exchanges only go as far as negotiations and agreement on a transaction. The accounts system handles the next steps, payment/favours and feedback/reputation which I see as mostly accessed through the Who We Are section.)

Who We Are: This is the database of members (local green directory as above), and their connection to their community. We have tried extending the Discord members info a little but this is not very satisfactory. One proposal is to use [Airtable](#). How do we indicate the trust network, in a way that makes it easy for any member to indicate whom they trust? With regard to businesses, that may look more like a 'I'm a regular customer'. The accounts system should come as early as possible and is likely to be the biggest benefit of membership, if it can become well used.

Commons: This is the area for self-governance (agreeing on values, rules, etc.). I see this as largely sets of documents attached to polls and discussions. Something like [NextCloud](#) might work well for this. At one point in the EU Prize development we tried to combine NextCloud and Discourse using [Cloudfun](#), but then found we could do most of what we needed without NextCloud.

Direction: This, similarly, will largely be discussions, but also may include linked documents and polls attached to them. This area also includes discussions with external organisations that aren't local, and may use completely different, external systems.

The later, specially designed system

I think we should have a general idea of what this will be and do some preliminary explorations. It may be that we can find allies here, or that some software under development will be coming soon.

Hosting: One of the major features of this software package, overall, is that it is owned and controlled by the community. It should not use major commercial packages which harvest user data and sell it, and which are full of ads or worse. Especially, it should not be full of bots, lots of manipulation and falsehoods, and fake accounts. It is meant to be the basis of a community based on trust and integrity. In its early stages it will not have a large number of users, but they will be people who are important in the lives of its members, as they are supporting and trading with each other, and giving each other credit.

Ideally, all the software should be hosted locally, and should be solidly backed up and secure. I had good contact with the people at [Holo/Holochain](#) (and see <https://forum.holo.host/> which uses Discourse) in 2019 when they were partners in our failed EU prize application. They are building “a better web... for cloud hosting peer to peer applications” using blockchain technology. I have one of their Holoport+ servers, available for someone to play with. Their philosophy is very much in line with our social model. In their most recent notices, the Holo people are promoting [Neighborhoods](#) as a starting point, which might just be a suitable place for us to connect.

In the shorter term, I had thought we might be able to partner with the [upp.com](#) providers of fibre broadband locally, who I thought of as a local company and who might supply servers. I’ve just seen that they have been bought by Virgin-O2 and don’t know how that affects the desirability.

Possible applications to explore and possibly include:

1 For a discussion system, [Hylø](#) is owned by Holo (I think) and may be just what we need. At a recent conference I attended, they were talking about [FUDforum](#) as having the ideal structure, with a recursive group structure, fully open source, but a very old-fashioned appearance. Might be worth exploring.

3. For a system of allocating funds within a group in a very democratic way, there is [CoBudget](#). It was developed by a very good group, [Enspiral](#).

4. I mentioned above, [NextCloud](#), (“The most popular open source content collaboration platform for tens of millions of users at thousands of organizations across the globe.”) which is like an open source version of Google Drive.

That’s it for now. This all needs to be discussed by the people looking at the software side.