



**transition**  
**SOUTHAMPTON**

# IMAGINE SOUTHAMPTON

Aug 2016

A different democratic process

When Transition Southamptom decided to run their Annual General Meeting in a different way, using Art of Hosting techniques, the results were amazing. This is a summary of how it happened and what was learned.

A report by Liz Batten and Clare Diaper

# IMAGINE SOUTHAMPTON

## A DIFFERENT DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

### 1. THE PLANNING PROCESS

Following the COP21 agreement in Paris in December 2015 ([more here](#)), there was a sense of anticipation – a recognition that *this time* all nations were taking the issue of climate change more seriously and agreement on action was happening. What would be the consequences for our individual countries and, most importantly, for our cities?

In the run up to COP21, various events had occurred in Southampton, drawing attention to ideas and processes we could be involved in. One of these was the opportunity to contribute to the preliminary stage of developing the Local Plan ([more here](#)), at a meeting run by Dangerous Ideas. A key finding from the meeting was that the “...City needs a unique vision – one that is not led by developers but led by the community.” The full document is [here](#).

Also in the mix was concern within Transition Southampton that the workload for the core group was too high, and that we were faced with a serious decision: should we carry on and risk burnout? Should we consider stopping altogether? Three of us spent some time with Lucy Dorey, a mindfulness teacher and supporter of Transition. She took us through a process of visualising what we had accomplished (a huge amount of work!), and also imagining a documentary of what Southampton of the future might look like. Unknown to us at the time, this work percolated through into what was to happen next. To our delight, more people engaged in Transition Southampton over the next few months.

Coincidentally, a group of people from Southampton had attended Art of Hosting training in November 2015, and this had led to many conversations across the City about how to engage people more fruitfully in defining what they really cared about – what they truly wanted for themselves and their community. Art of Hosting “*is a group of methods, based on a set of assumptions and world views, that enables conversation in groups of all sizes. It is supported by principles that help maximise collective intelligence, integrate and utilise diversity, and transform conflict.*”

*The approaches tend to result in collective clarity and wise action – sustainable, workable solutions to the most complex problems. Participants own the process because it is transparent and they participate in the design. Ongoing feedback, learning and changes in direction are part of an Art of Hosting approach.*” (Course manual, The Art of Hosting: new futures for our towns and cities, Nov 2015)

Another Transition member had participated in the Transition conference at Seale Hayne, and experienced Open Space (with a difference) there and at other events and workshops. The

new story of Transition being ‘a global movement, one in which we care about ourselves, each other and the world we live in’ was a strong message taken back to the local group from the conference. This member had also undertaken Community Development training, which had introduced other tools and methods for community engagement.

*Community development is a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems. Community wellbeing (economic, social, environmental and cultural) often evolves from this type of collective action being taken at a grassroots level.*

In this context, the planning for Transition Southampton’s Annual General Meeting began. The theme agreed was “the future”: what did our City hope for as we make the adjustment to a low carbon, and more satisfying lifestyle? The title emerged as “Imagine Southampton” and a possible structure was discussed. It became apparent that this time we were looking to do things differently.

This initial conversation helped one member of the group to write a summary of what Transition, as a movement, is about in today’s context:

**Transition is about helping people to develop a vision of what a better place to live in might look and feel like** - we don't have to feel trapped in what we have created so far, we can look beyond to what we want and we can analyse the present for what we want to leave behind.

**Transition is solutions-focussed as well as visionary.** Transition is about providing practical demonstrations of how these ideas and visions can work. All our current projects and those of our partners are demonstrations of how we can work together on practical solutions to climate change, using self-help and building community.

**Transition is about shock removal (or reduction).** Sudden changes to our behaviour can be uncomfortable and unwanted. In creating a dialogue which introduces the ideas of how we can change our behaviour, and help reduce global warming, we portray a future which is possible and maintains a sense of self-efficacy.

**Transition is about normalising behaviour which supports and enhances health, wellbeing and self-sufficiency** - behaviour which considers the health of the planet and the individual and their community as one and not separate.

## 2. THE DESIGN STAGE

It was proposed and agreed that we would use the World Café format for the main process of the AGM. A “calling question” was formulated which aimed to focus on what would be meaningful for the participants, trigger their curiosity and invite them to explore further. Considerable effort was put into selecting a suitable venue and creating a relaxed and inviting atmosphere for the event. Invitations were sent out widely across the City, including environmental and other community groups, local councillors, council officers and the 700 plus

readership of the Transition Southampton newsletter. The group of people who had attended Art of Hosting training were enlisted to support the event.

### 3. IMAGINE SOUTHAMPTON – 12<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2016

Approximately 60 people attended the event, which was led by us and assisted by a team of Art of Hosting trainees, who acted as “table hosts”. The evening was set in the context of telling a new story, with a quote from Thomas Berry from *The Dream of the Earth* written up and displayed in the venue.

It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story

Following a shared supper and a poster session, participants sat at the café tables and the process was explained. A short mindfulness session followed, led by Lucy Dorey. Then the calling question was revealed:

*Imagine if, when you wake up tomorrow morning, Southampton is as you would like it to be.  
What does it look like? How do you feel? What are you doing?  
What is your life like?*

Each table had twenty minutes to discuss the questions and write or draw what emerged for them on big sheets of paper. Then a second round on a different table was conducted, with the table hosts remaining in place to summarise what had gone before and help initiate a new discussion which added ideas to the same sheet of paper.



Next, participants were asked to write their top three ideas on post-it notes and to place them on images of a tree, a sun, a watering can or a compost heap. Two people had been acting as “butterflies”, visiting all the tables and listening to the discussions. They fed back summaries of what they had heard and put their post-it notes on an image of a butterfly.

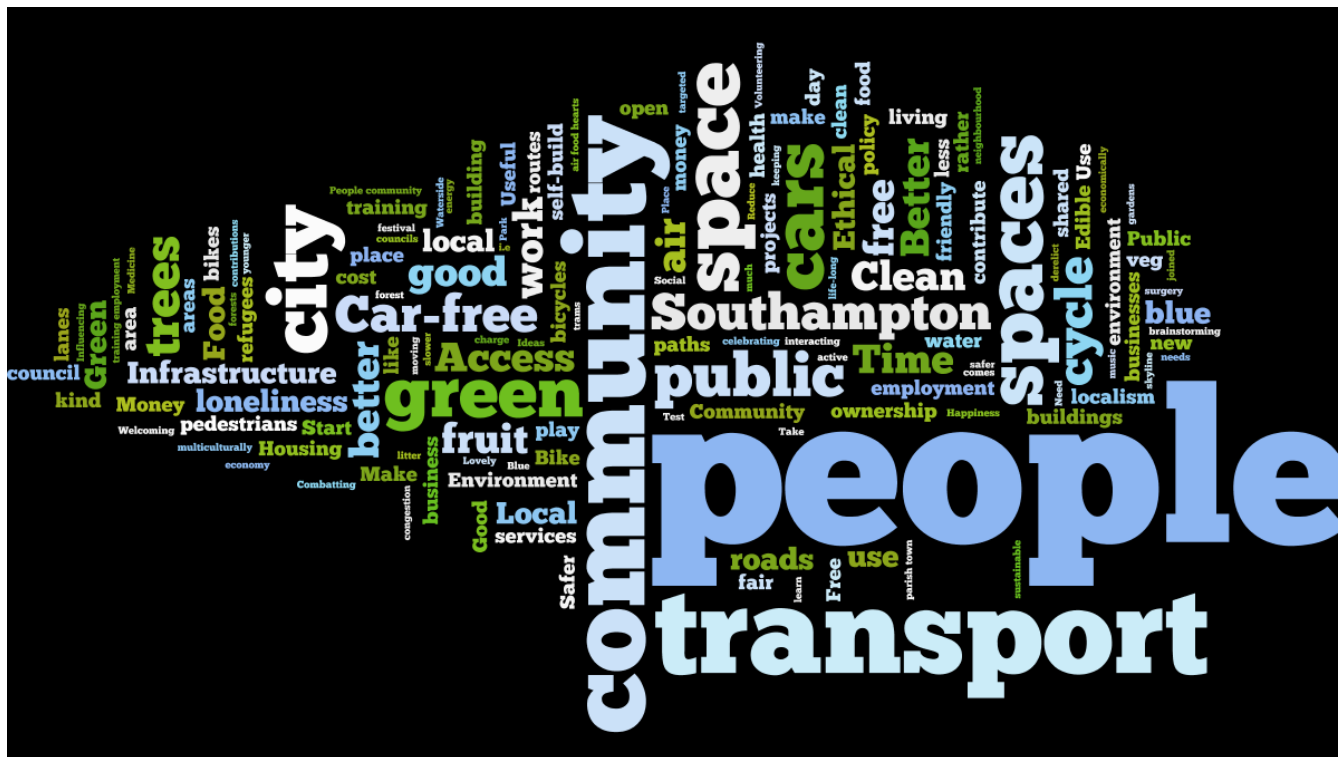
The volume of ideas produced was enormous and very wide ranging. People spent time looking at the work and discussing it further and a consensus emerged that this couldn't be the end of the process – that more work was needed to group the ideas and develop them more.



#### 4. REVIEWING IMAGINE SOUTHAMPTON

After the first meeting, lists of the ideas produced were created and categorised. The tree, sun, watering can and compost, with all the post-it notes attached, were put up and reviewed. The categories of ideas included: transport, the local economy, people/community, food,

environment/nature, living in the City (the built environment and decision-making). All the words were fed into Wordle and it produced an eye-catching design, which subsequently was used to publicise Imagine Southampton – Step Two which would take place on 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2016.



There was valuable feedback included in a blog ([here](#)) written by one of the participants, Rebecca Kinge of Dangerous Ideas, who summarised the evening’s imaginings:

**“The City needs to respond to the needs of people and the environment. People want to be closer to nature, trees and water, and they want these to be social spaces. They want this linked with skills and apprenticeships. Fewer cars and less emphasis on the pursuit of capitalism. We all need more time and space to access greater opportunity.”**

5. IMAGINE SOUTHAMPTON – STEP TWO – 10<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2016

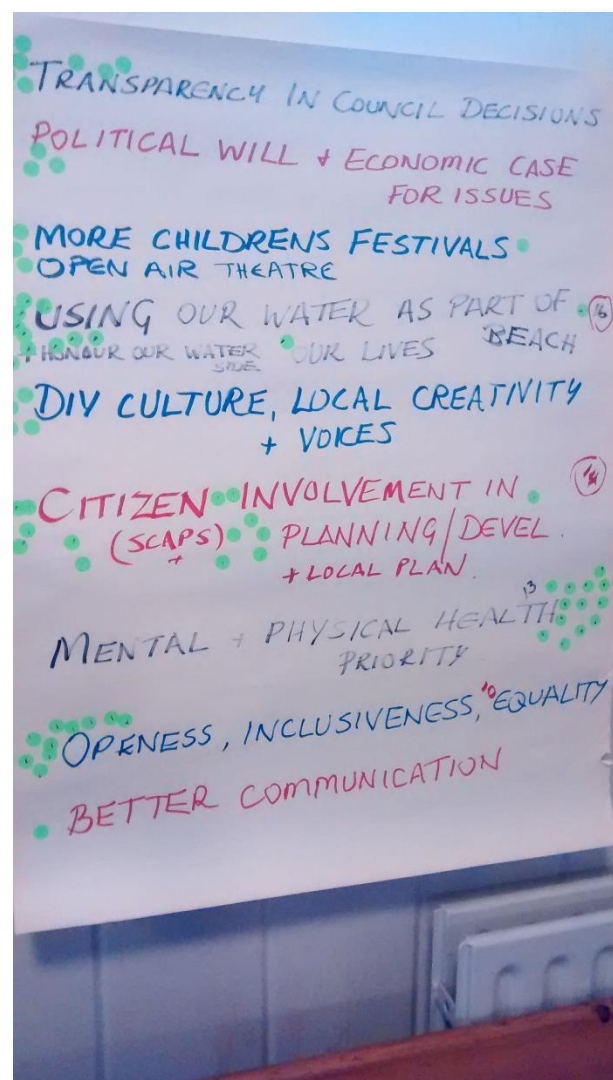
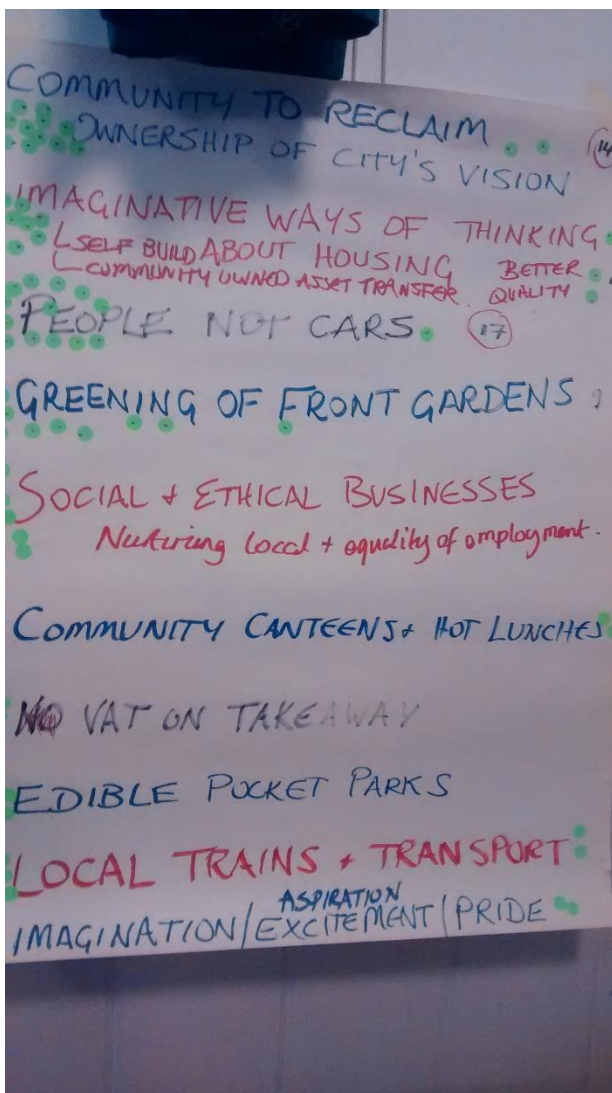
For the second meeting, the café was recreated, with all the worksheets and the tree, sun, watering can and compost heap in place. Participants (some of whom were attending for the first time) were taken through the process of the first meeting and asked to look at the sheets of ideas which had been produced. This was an opportunity both to become familiar with the previous work and to add to it. Then there was an opportunity to look at all the post-it notes and to create a list of themes and patterns which emerged from the work done so far.

Each group shared items from their lists, which were written up. A list of some twenty or so themes emerged. At this point, participants were given coloured dots and asked to vote for the

items on the list of themes they would like to see go forward. The top four would then be worked on in groups.

The four themes which received the most votes were:

- People not cars
- Using our water as part of our lives (honour our waterside)
- Citizen involvement in the planning/development process (Local Plan)
- Community to reclaim ownership of City's vision



People worked on the four themes, moving to whichever group appealed to them. Further ideas emerged about what they might mean and how to progress with them.

At the end of this process the entire group asked to meet again to work on the themes, so Imagine Southampton – Step Three was agreed.

#### 6. IMAGINE SOUTHAMPTON – STEP THREE – 28<sup>th</sup> JUNE 2016

A review of Step Two suggested that there had been too much emphasis on “work” and “how to progress”, which had deterred busy people from engaging further with the process. As a result, Step Three was designed using a technique called “Open Space”. This helps to approach an issue with no pre-set agenda and instead invites participants to share a project or an idea, and to receive feedback from interested participants.

##### Principles of Open Space:

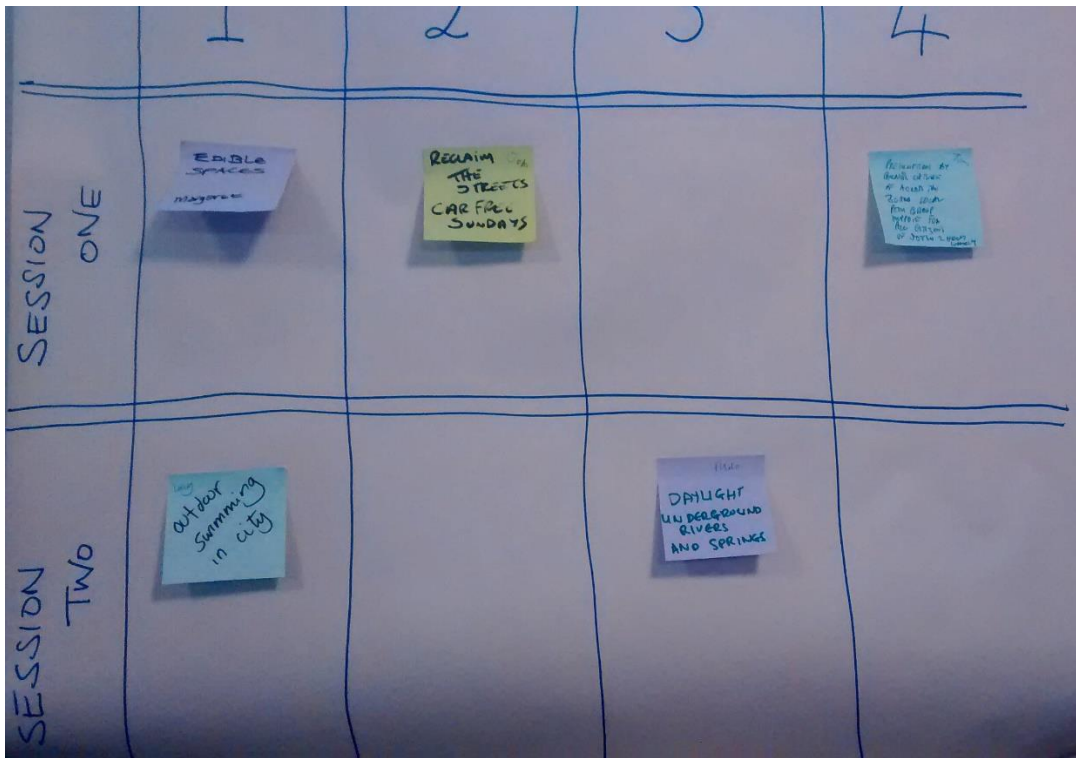
- Whoever comes are the right people
- Whenever it starts is the right time
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have
- When it's over it's over

With these principles in mind, the meeting was designed to help participants to access their creativity and bring forward an idea or project to be worked on, should they so desire. A script from Transition Network ([courtesy of Rob Hopkins](#)) was adapted and so began the voyage of the “Imagination of the Seas”. After a short introduction to the work which had gone before (and which was displayed around the room) and mindfulness session, participants were encouraged to imagine they were on the sustainable ship “Imagination of the Seas” and to dress for dinner on board. Dressing up materials were supplied. The three members of the crew explained how the process would work. Group members were asked the following question:

##### ***What might be your next step – in imagining Southampton?***

Six people came forward with ideas to work on and these were divided into two half hour sessions of three topics in three locations in the room. Each volunteer was provided with a work sheet to guide their process of exploring their idea. Group members were invited to move to the location which was of interest to them and to observe “the law of two feet” – if you find yourself in a situation where you are not contributing or learning, move somewhere where you can.





The groups formed and there was a buzz in the room with lots of ideas flowing from all participants.



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At the end of the two rounds of sharing ideas, the Open Space session was closed and the facilitators summarised the three meetings and offered to write it all up.

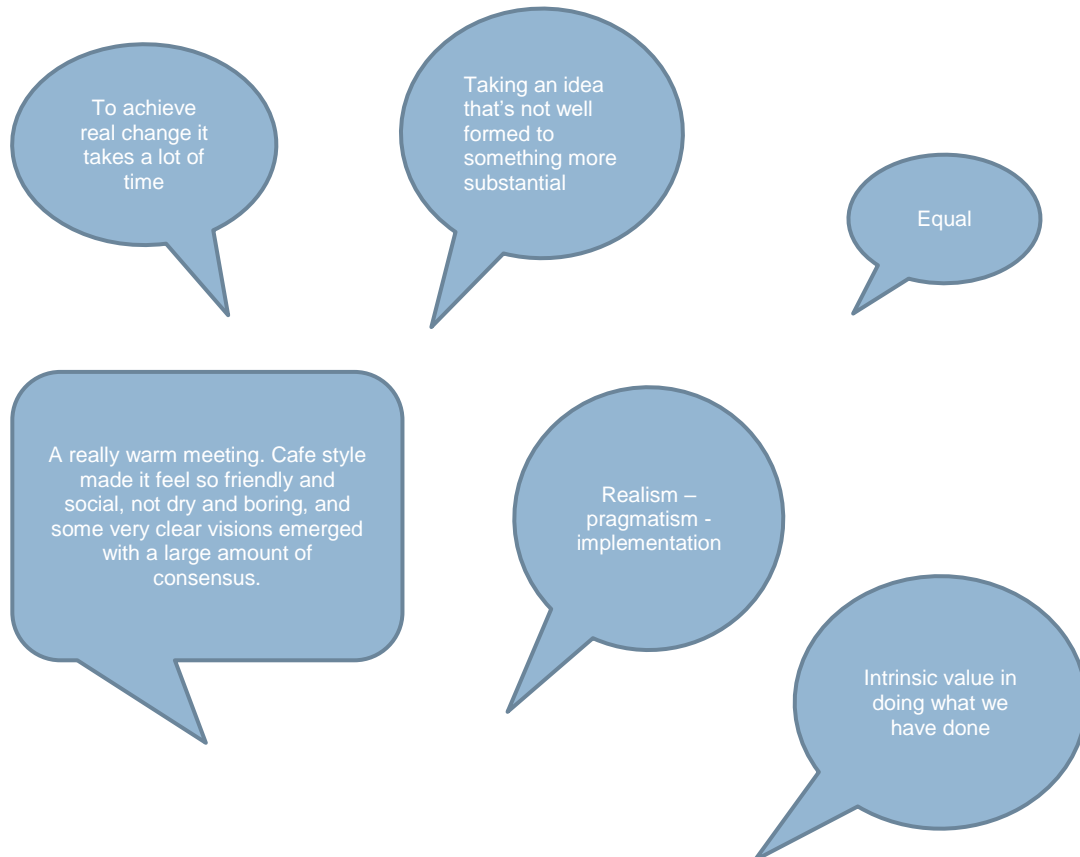
## 7. WHAT WE LEARNED

What started as an experiment in running our AGM in a different way, grew into a series of events which have seemed to influence and inspire in a very different way. These are our thoughts after having gone through the process:

- It was really challenging to drop our usual “aims and objectives” approach to running meetings and to not have an agenda of our own
- Letting go of our own agenda appeared to free up the audience and energized them to work on the questions we posed
- We did not “patrol” the groups as they were working and they appeared to resolve any issues which arose for themselves
- The amount of creativity and energy released by these processes was truly inspiring
- The methods used gave everyone a chance to speak. Most people appeared to be comfortable with the World Café format, working in small groups, having the opportunity to move around the room at will, and having their contributions included and valued
- At the beginning of the first and third meeting participants were asked to define what having a meaningful conversation entailed and to abide by those values – this ensured that, in the main, each person got a fair opportunity to speak and that everyone was listened to carefully
- Other groups in the City may well take up these methods of working, as a means to fully involve participants in considering issues of importance to them – we have had feedback from participants to suggest this is happening
- We are adopting the Art of Hosting methods for our own business meetings and finding it much more rewarding
- The influence of these meetings has begun permeating our activities, and led to engagement with more individuals and groups around the issues raised. There has been a greater involvement in the planning process, especially those applications that affect waterfront access and the effects of new developments and associated transport on our lives in the City. This could be helping to redefine the role of Transition Southampton by broadening out its remit and consequently its appeal.

## 8. FEEDBACK

During the meetings and afterwards we received feedback from participants. Here is a snapshot of what we received about the experience of being a participant in the meetings:



We have also seen Wordles, open space and other tools we used popping up in other groups, events and organisations in the city, which may just mean we are more aware of others using these techniques, or that a small spark of transition imagination has inspired them.

## 9. SUMMARY

The process that we have been through in Southampton in the last six months has been set within the context of leaving the European Union and the increasing uncertainty about our future and the story we want to develop for ourselves. The process allowed a new type of democracy to emerge, one based on conversations for everyone.

These techniques are not new

When we imagine letting go great things can happen



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Lucy Dorey

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### References:

Art of Hosting: <http://www.artofhosting.org/>

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