ELP2

Growing together: Lessons and insights from our first year of partnership

An ELP2 Share, Learn, Improve report 2024

UpRising

Shropshire Wildlife Trust

COMMUNITY FUND

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The Environmental Leadership Programme 2 (ELP2) launched in 2023 led by UpRising, in partnership with Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT). The programme, with its bespoke curriculum focussed around developing nature connection through practical delivery of campaigning, has created a platform for future green leaders across the West Midlands. The project aims to support 400 young people aged 18 – 25 from underrepresented and underserved backgrounds across the West Midlands region to: build a stronger personal connection to nature; understand how this drives behaviour change; and co-create and deliver nature connection campaigns in their own communities.

The principles of "share, learn, improve" are fundamental to the success of the ELP2 programme and the goals of the Climate Action Fund. By fostering a collaborative environment where projects can share their experiences, learn from each other, and continuously improve their approaches, the programme creates a powerful ecosystem for driving meaningful climate action. This approach not only maximises the impact of individual projects but also contributes to a broader movement of change. Through regular events, networking sessions, and co-learning opportunities, participants can exchange best practices, overcome challenges collectively, and adapt their strategies based on shared insights. This collaborative ethos ensures that the £100m investment by the Climate Action Fund yields exponential benefits, as innovations and successful models can be rapidly disseminated and scaled across the UK. Ultimately, the "share, learn, improve" philosophy accelerates progress towards a more resilient and equitable future by harnessing the collective wisdom and experiences of diverse community-led initiatives.

The purpose of this report is to develop the external Share, Learn, Improve Insight Piece for the first year, centred around the theme of 'Working in Partnership'. This initiative aims to analyse various insights gained during the initial year of the collaboration between UpRising and SWT as the organisations developed and began delivering the ELP2 (Environmental Leadership Programme version 2) programme in the West Midlands. By meeting with individuals across the project team, we have gathered comprehensive perspectives on the successes and challenges encountered in this partnership. Our primary interest lies in understanding the lessons learned about effective collaboration between organisations from different backgrounds and sectors to address complex issues, such as people's disconnect from nature and the climate crisis.

The insight piece serves several key purposes:

- **Celebration of collaboration:** Highlight the benefits and positive outcomes achieved through the collaborative efforts of UpRising and Shropshire Wildlife Trust.
- **Identification of challenges:** Present the difficulties faced during the partnership and provide a detailed analysis of these obstacles.
- **Strategies for improvement:** Offer recommendations and strategies to overcome identified challenges, enhancing the effectiveness of future collaborative efforts.

Through this insight piece, we aim to provide valuable information and actionable insights for other organisations considering or engaged in similar partnerships, thereby contributing to the broader goal of addressing complex environmental and social challenges through effective collaboration.

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Method

To evaluate the progress and impact of the partnership over the first year, the following methodological steps were undertaken:

1. Analysis of first 6 months of the partnership team survey (Dec 23). Analysis of team survey findings from the first six months of the partnership (December 2023), which marks six months into the partnership. This survey was designed to capture a wide range of data points, including team satisfaction, perceived progress, and areas needing improvement. The survey results were systematically reviewed and analysed to identify trends, strengths, and challenges within the partnership.

2. Review of report from external coaching
The partnership engaged professional coach and founder of Opportunity2Improve ,Simone de Boer, an external coach, to provide an independent assessment and guidance. Her report was thoroughly reviewed to gain insights into the effectiveness of the coaching provided, as well as to understand her recommendations for enhancing the partnership's dynamics and performance. This review included an evaluation of the strategies and methodologies proposed by Simone and their alignment with the partnership's goals.

3. 1:1 interviews with team members
One-on-one interviews were conducted with team members involved in the project to gather qualitative data. These interviews aimed to capture personal experiences, insights, and feedback from individuals across different roles and responsibilities within the team. The interview questions were designed to explore various aspects of the partnership, including communication, collaboration, and overall satisfaction. The qualitative data obtained from these interviews were analysed to identify common themes and individual perspectives that could inform further improvements.

The interviews explored various aspects of partnership experiences. It began by discussing the dynamics of working with organisations from different sectors, highlighting the challenges and insights gained from managing differing priorities. The focus then shifted to personal and organisational learning, examining what was learned about effective collaboration over the past year.

Team members reflected on teamwork dynamics involving individuals from various organisations and identified key factors that supported successful collaboration. They also considered both formal practices (such as policies and project management techniques) and informal practices (like communication norms) that enhanced partnership effectiveness.

The discussion delved into potential improvements in partnership outcomes and explored strategies for overcoming ongoing challenges. Participants were encouraged to reflect on what advice they would have offered their past selves regarding partnership strategies and were prompted to consider the risks associated with inadequate investment in setting up partnerships effectively.

Reflecting on the ELP2 UpRising and SWT partnership so far

In the partnership between UpRising and SWT, both organisations have embarked on a journey of mutual learning and collaboration. Each entity has benefitted from the exchange of expertise, gaining valuable insights into how to effectively navigate partnerships with other organisations. However, this journey has not been without its challenges.

UpRising, characterised by its small size and agility, has demonstrated a remarkable ability to swiftly initiate and finalise decisions. This nimbleness has been a significant asset, allowing them to adapt quickly to project demands and operational requirements. On the other hand, the differing sizes of the organisations have been a notable factor, influencing their respective capacities to act with speed and flexibility. Interviews highlighted that while UpRising can pivot swiftly, the broader engagements and commitments of team members sometimes posed constraints.

Throughout the partnership, both organisations have relished the opportunity to contribute their unique skills, expertise, and experiences to the joint project. Nevertheless, barriers such as time constraints and limited space in the project plan occasionally hindered the seamless integration of these contributions. These challenges, while demanding, have also served as valuable learning experiences for all involved.

Reflecting on their collaborative efforts, staff members noted a steep learning curve for both organisations. Many expressed surprise at the differences in organisational cultures and working styles, underscoring the complexity of integrating two distinct entities towards a common goal. Despite these hurdles, there was a prevailing sense of satisfaction and fulfilment among most participants, who appreciated the energy and fresh perspectives that collaboration brought to meetings and tasks.

Looking ahead, there is excitement and optimism about future prospects. Anticipation surrounds new team members joining, the imminent completion of the first programme cohort, and the proactive steps being taken to enhance delivery in the second year. Lessons learned from the initial phase are poised to inform and improve future initiatives, reinforcing the belief that despite challenges, the partnership has laid a solid foundation for continued success and growth.

While the UpRising and SWT partnership has presented its share of obstacles, it has equally provided invaluable learning opportunities and moments of shared achievement. As they navigate through complexities and differences, both organisations remain committed to leveraging their strengths and fostering a collaborative spirit that enriches their collective impact.

Findings

Benefits

Partnership working embodies a remarkable opportunity to merge diverse skills, experiences, and expertise toward a common vision, fostering transformative change. It serves as a platform to explore innovative approaches and novel systems, cultivating a fertile ground for learning and growth. Through collaborative efforts, projects and processes evolve, refining and advancing to achieve heightened effectiveness and impact. Partnership thrives on the synergy of collective strengths, propelling initiatives forward with a combined force of creativity and shared purpose.

Prior to our partnership, UpRising had identified the value of outdoor learning through its Our Bright Future funded Environmental Leadership Programmes and approached SWT to develop a programme across the West Midlands region. The programme combines UpRising's record of engaging and supporting young people from underrepresented and underserved communities with SWT's experiences of outdoor learning, building nature connection and community campaigns.

Challenges

1. Alignment with organisational priorities: Navigating how the project aligns with each organisation's broader goals requires intentional exploration and consensus-building. Without clear alignment, conflicts in resource allocation and strategic direction can arise, impacting project success.

2. Disparate induction processes: Varying induction processes across organisations within the project team can lead to confusion and inefficiencies. Harmonising these processes ensures that team members integrate smoothly and understand their roles within both their organisation and the project team.

3. Establishing shared culture and values: Creating a unified team culture distinct from individual organisational cultures is crucial for fostering collaboration and mutual understanding. A team away day to co-create these shared values can mitigate misunderstandings and enhance team cohesion.

4. Clarifying programme vision and ownership: Ensuring a cohesive understanding of the program's vision and ownership across all project components is essential. A detailed program specification helps clarify roles and responsibilities, preventing overlaps or gaps in project management.

5. Recruitment and integration challenges: Recruiting and integrating project team members from different organisations requires careful planning. Ensuring clarity on priorities, systems, and management expectations alleviates confusion among team members dedicated to partnership projects.

6. Adoption of processes and policies: Simply establishing processes and policies is insufficient; they must be actively adopted by all team members. Collaboratively building these structures promotes buy-in and ensures they are integrated into daily practices across diverse organisational contexts.

7. Management of diverse team dynamics: Managing a team with diverse roles and management experiences poses challenges. Balancing core team operations with the varying day-to-day management styles across organisations can create disparities in workload and perceived fairness.

8. Communication and coordination issues: Calendar access and conflicting priorities often hinder effective communication. Whilst protected meeting times and proactive scheduling help, practical challenges include onboarding partners to new tools (such as Slack in the case of this project) and navigating conflicting platform preferences. For instance, when a Microsoft-based organisation uses Google Drive, it leads to file compatibility issues and workflow disruptions. Addressing platform alignment early and providing necessary training can significantly improve collaboration and reduce project friction.

9. Leveraging partner expertise and experience: Recognising and leveraging each organisation's unique skills and experiences is critical. Mapping out these contributions prevents underutilisation and ensures that each partner's expertise is valued and integrated into project planning and execution.

10. Partnership dynamics and power imbalances: Navigating power dynamics within partnerships, where some organisations may feel marginalised or overly burdened, requires sensitivity and proactive management to foster equitable collaboration and prevent resentment.

11. Challenges for small organisations: Small organisations can feel isolated within larger partnerships. Creating support structures and opportunities for peer interaction within the project context helps mitigate feelings of isolation and enhances engagement.

12. Adaptation to new ways of working: Teams unaccustomed to collaborative partnerships or organisational turnover may struggle to adapt. Additional time and support are necessary to facilitate this transition and ensure effective teamwork.

Risks of not investing in the partnership

Failure to invest adequately in our partnership poses several critical risks that could undermine our collective goals and impact. Firstly, there's a significant danger of not meeting our intended outcomes. Without the necessary resources and support, we may fall short of delivering the results we've committed to, which could damage our credibility and trustworthiness among stakeholders and project funders.

Moreover, insufficient investment could lead to reputational damage. A compromised reputation not only affects our current projects but also jeopardises our future collaborations and funding opportunities. This, in turn, could weaken our ability to attract and retain talented staff members, leading to high turnover rates and diminished morale.

Furthermore, inadequate investment affects the overall experience of our delivery processes. From project execution to beneficiary engagement, the lack of resources can make the journey less efficient and less enjoyable for everyone involved. Our beneficiaries, in particular, may not receive the quality of service they deserve, impacting their overall satisfaction and outcomes.

On a broader scale, the partnership itself may be at risk of failure without proper investment. Partners may find it challenging to enjoy their roles and fully commit to our shared objectives if they feel unsupported or undervalued. This lack of investment also heightens the risk of communication breakdowns and operational inefficiencies, making it difficult to coordinate effectively and make informed decisions.

Moreover, without adequate resources, our projects may not reach their full potential. We could struggle to prioritise effectively, and our outcomes may not align with our initial goals and expectations. This discrepancy between aspirations and realities can lead to frustration and demotivation among our team members, impacting their job satisfaction and overall engagement.

In essence, investing in our partnership isn't just about financial resources—it's about nurturing a collaborative environment where everyone feels valued and motivated to contribute their best. It's about ensuring that we can deliver on our promises, maintain strong relationships with our partners, and ultimately, make a meaningful impact on the communities we serve.

By recognising and addressing these risks, we can proactively safeguard the success and sustainability of our partnership, ensuring that we continue to deliver effective solutions and positive outcomes for all stakeholders involved.

Discussion

Setting up a good foundation

Successful collaboration across organisational boundaries in projects necessitates a meticulous approach to several key factors: alignment, integration, communication, and proactive management of team dynamics and organisational cultures. These elements are crucial for enhancing project outcomes and fostering enduring partnerships.
Ensuring alignment involves taking the time to explore how the project aligns with each organisation's broader priorities. This foundational understanding ensures that all stakeholders are pulling in the same direction, minimising conflicting objectives and maximising shared goals. The timing of team integration also plays a pivotal role. Starting all team members together, with a uniform introduction and induction process, fosters a cohesive team spirit from the outset. This approach was notably effective in projects where delayed team integration led to disparities in familiarity and cohesion among team members.

Early exploration of potential risks is equally vital. By identifying and addressing risks proactively, teams can mitigate potential disruptions before they escalate. Establishing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that includes risk identification and mitigation strategies, alongside a robust governance framework, provides a structured mechanism for managing uncertainties throughout the project lifecycle. Effective communication lies at the heart of successful collaboration. Utilising agile project management methodologies ensures that all team members are consistently engaged in discussions about tasks, priorities, and any impediments they encounter. This approach promotes transparency and responsiveness, enabling swift resolution of issues as they arise. Addressing challenges promptly is crucial. Team members must feel empowered to voice concerns early and openly, ensuring that issues are addressed promptly rather than allowing them to fester and potentially derail progress. Managing expectations, particularly when working with project beneficiaries, is a key responsibility. Clarifying objectives and timelines early on helps to align stakeholder expectations with project realities, reducing the risk of disappointment or misunderstanding down the line. Finally, nurturing team morale is a collective responsibility. Establishing clear management processes ensures that any issues affecting team dynamics or individual performance are addressed swiftly and fairly, safeguarding the collaborative spirit essential to project success.
Successful collaboration in cross-organisational projects demands a holistic approach that integrates strategic alignment, proactive risk management, effective communication practices, and a supportive team culture. By taking a proactive approach, investing in the partnership consistently throughout the project and not just when issues arise, organisations can not only enhance project outcomes but also cultivate enduring partnerships that thrive over the long term.

Remote partnerships

In the context of remote partnerships, where physical distance can pose challenges, proactive communication becomes even more critical. Platforms like Slack have proven invaluable in fostering a sense of connection and immediacy among distributed teams, thereby mitigating the isolation that can impede collaboration. While remote communication tools are essential, prioritising in-person meetings whenever feasible is equally important. Face-to-face interactions build trust, rapport, and accountability among team members, reinforcing the personal connections that underpin effective teamwork.

Importance of longer mobilisation periods

In the realm of project management, particularly in large-scale initiatives involving multiple stakeholders, the concept of longer mobilisation periods necessitates a nuanced understanding by all involved parties—funders, trustees, project leads, and project partners. Mobilisation periods refer to the initial phases of a project where resources are gathered, teams are formed, and preliminary planning is conducted. These periods are critical for setting the foundation for the entire project, ensuring that all necessary components are in place before full-scale implementation begins. However, the intricacies and benefits of extended mobilisation periods are often overlooked or misunderstood, which can lead to misaligned expectations and project inefficiencies.

Longer mobilisation periods offer several advantages. They provide ample time for thorough planning and risk assessment, which can lead to more accurate project scopes and timelines. Extended periods also allow for better stakeholder engagement and communication, fostering a more collaborative environment. This can be particularly beneficial in projects involving diverse partners with varying objectives and expectations. Additionally, longer mobilisation periods enable more comprehensive resource allocation and training, ensuring that the project team is fully prepared and equipped to tackle the project's challenges.

Despite these advantages, several challenges hinder the effective understanding and implementation of longer mobilisation periods. One significant challenge is the pressure from funders and trustees to see quick results. The urgency to demonstrate progress can lead to a rush through the mobilisation phase, resulting in inadequate preparation and unforeseen issues later in the project lifecycle. Funders, who often hold the purse strings, may not fully appreciate the long-term benefits of a well-mobilised project, focusing instead on short-term deliverables.

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The role of funders and trustees

Funders and trustees play a crucial role in shaping the project's initial stages. Their understanding of the importance of mobilisation can significantly influence the project's success. They need to be educated about the benefits of extended mobilisation periods and how these can lead to more sustainable and impactful outcomes. This education can take the form of detailed briefings, case studies of successful projects with longer mobilisation phases, and ongoing dialogue with project leads to align expectations.

Funders need to be more explicit about their expectations and requirements when it comes to partnership working. Ambiguity in what funders are looking for can lead to misaligned objectives among project partners, causing friction and inefficiencies. Funders should provide clear guidelines on the types of partnership models they prefer, the roles and responsibilities of each partner, and the metrics for success. This clarity will help in selecting the right partners and structuring the collaboration in a way that aligns with the funder's vision and goals.

There are various models and approaches within partnership working, each suited to different types of projects and objectives. For instance, a consortia model, where multiple organisations come together to deliver a project, can leverage diverse expertise but requires robust coordination mechanisms. On the other hand, a lead partner model, where one organisation takes the lead and subcontracts to others, can streamline decision-making but may limit the input from smaller partners. Understanding these models and choosing the appropriate one is essential for the project's success.

A deeper understanding of longer mobilisation periods and partnership working models is crucial for all stakeholders in a project. Funders, trustees, project leads, and partners must work together to appreciate the benefits of thorough preparation and clear expectations. By investing time in the mobilisation phase and selecting the right partnership models, projects can achieve more sustainable and impactful outcomes, ultimately leading to greater success and satisfaction for all parties involved.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the partnership between UpRising and Shropshire Wildlife Trust represents a journey marked by both challenges and significant achievements in their collaborative effort to deliver the ELP2 programme. Throughout this first year, the partnership has underscored the value of merging diverse expertise and perspectives towards a common environmental and social goal. Despite initial hurdles such as differing organisational cultures and logistical complexities, both organisations have demonstrated resilience and adaptability in navigating these challenges.

The insights gleaned from team surveys, external coaching, and individual interviews have provided invaluable lessons for enhancing future collaborative efforts. Key findings highlight the importance of clear communication, aligned goals, and proactive management of team dynamics. These elements are essential not only for overcoming obstacles but also for maximising the unique strengths each partner brings to the table. Looking ahead, there is optimism for continued growth and impact as the partnership evolves. Anticipated improvements in programme delivery and the integration of new team members reflect a commitment to refining strategies based on lessons learned. By addressing the identified challenges head-on and capitalising on shared successes,

UpRising and Shropshire Wildlife Trust look forward to strengthening their partnership and the ELP2 programme throughout the remaining years of the project, contributing meaningfully to environmental leadership and community engagement in the West Midlands. The project aims to support 400 young people aged 18 – 25 from underrepresented and underserved backgrounds across the West Midlands region to: build a stronger personal connection to nature; understand how this drives behaviour change; and co-create and deliver nature connection campaigns in their own communities.

10 top tips for partnership development

From our findings and analysis, we've developed 10 top tips to support other organisations through the foundational stages of a partnership. We hope they are informative and helpful.

1. Share organisational stories: Take the time to openly share each organisation's history, strengths, and areas for development. Understanding each other's background fosters empathy and collaboration.

2. Establish clear roles and responsibilities: Define roles early on to avoid confusion and ensure accountability within the partnership.

3. Align values and goals: Ensure that all parties involved share common values and goals to maintain alignment throughout the partnership.

4. Build rapport and trust: Allow space for team members to connect personally. Building relationships based on trust enhances collaboration and problem-solving.

5. Set clear ways of working: Establish explicit guidelines and protocols for communication, decision-making, and conflict resolution across the partnership.

6. Unified recruitment and induction: Ideally, have all team members start together on a project with a unified introduction and induction process. This promotes a cohesive team dynamic from the outset.

7. Standardised processes and policies: Ensure consistency in induction processes and ideally line management across partner organisations. This reduces confusion and aligns expectations.

8. Ensure adoption of processes: Actively involve team members in developing processes and structures collaboratively. This increases buy-in and ensures better adoption of agreed-upon methods.

9. Proactive issue management for remote teams: Address potential issues proactively in remote partnership teams. Tools like Slack can facilitate personal connections and smooth communication across different locations.

10. Manage organisational dynamics: Be mindful of power dynamics between lead and partner organisations. Foster open communication and mutual respect to avoid micromanagement by leads and feelings of powerlessness among partners. For existing projects, lead partners should balance their expertise with openness to new ideas and improvements. Encourage regular reflection and wider input from all stakeholders to enhance the quality of programme offerings for participants. This collaborative approach can lead to valuable innovations and ensure the programme remains responsive to evolving needs.

Thank you.

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