

Learning from the Bringing People Together Programme 2021-2024

Case Study – Understory (Onion Collective & Free Ice Cream)

“Understory gives you everyone’s view of a place not just one person’s or a few perspectives, you can see where you sit in a place from everyone’s point of view”

“The process has shown us that the very nature of community, which is often perceived as operating at a neighbourhood level, is in fact far better defined by social connections and infrastructure, than scale or spatial geographies”

Background

Understory is a community mapping tool which was developed by Onion Collective in partnership with design studio, Free Ice Cream, to capture and map the social capital in places. The digital mapping tool allows communities to “reveal the hidden connections that bind them together”, and is a clear example of how projects funded through Bringing People Together can enable rich learning to emerge from a strong method, a distinct and evolving set of approaches and a compelling narrative about community, relationships and connections in a place.

“Understory is for anyone who cares about people, thrives on connections and desires a collective approach to change”

In each place, the Understory team works with an anchor organisation to bring together all those in that area involved in community action - diverse organisations, groups, networks and importantly individuals - who together create a relational network map by answering 10 questions in an online survey completed in a workshop setting. Answers to these questions create a digital network map in real time – participants see the map of their place emerge before their eyes. A process follows where participants are invited to interrogate the map, check factual accuracy, and add others who are named in the session but may not have been present, to refine the map further. A set of tools allow communities to explore who is working towards which long term purposes, and who is connected to whom. It also shows which individuals and organisations are the most and least connected, or on the periphery of community action and may need support.

In the beginning (2020-2022)

“It was synchronicity and a trust based relationship that brought us together.” (Understory Team Interview)

The early stages of Understory’s journey predated Bringing People Together. The leads from Onion Collective and Free Ice-Cream have known each other for a long time, and this strong trusting relationship became the foundation of Understory’s development. It meant that initial ideas each partner was exploring at the same time, independently of each other, could be brought together to create something new and exciting. Onion Collective (OC) was engaged in a place-based social action project in Watchet, a small town on the west Somerset coast, that began by mapping key people, organisations and activities using paper and post it notes. They posted photographs of this activity on Instagram, where old friends from Free Ice Cream spotted it and instantly engaged. At that time, they were using gaming technology to develop a digital platform for understanding complex systems to achieve multiple sustainability goals for the UN, and both parties felt there was a clear synergy with OC’s activities in Watchet.

The partners secured funding to build a prototype of Understory, which evolved over a two year period, as they incorporated social network theory into the tool: *“loads of things went wrong but we were always excited about the idea of mapping connections between people.”* Early testing of the tool found that *“the act of mapping increases social capital in that place”*.

The BPT Era, 2022-2024 - “Everything about it was experimental”

Understory secured BPT funding from the Lottery in 2022, enabling the team to further develop the tool and test the process of mapping and hosting community conversations in more places across the UK. The BPT pilot communities were important in enhancing the underpinning community technology and exploring different dimensions (e.g. rural-urban) and aspects of social capital, connections, bridges and bonds with very different communities:

“We have discovered that the maps offered a new perspective from which communities can better understand themselves. Both the mapping process and the resultant maps were tools to begin a journey of exploration and self discovery – often with surprising results. Understory’s maps supported our partners to ask better questions of themselves and their communities, to question the way they work in their places, and to explore new ways to collaborate and new pathways to connection”. (Understory final report, March 2024)

What happened?

Over the course of this era, the Understory project:

- mapped **35 places** including 2 “mega maps” in Dudley (5 maps) and the Scottish Borders (10 maps)
- engaged **678 participants**
- named **4,151 organisations** as important to people’s work
- named **3,384 people** as important to connections in a place.

The Understory team took an experimental approach to choosing places and partners to work with over this period, including communities of very different scales and with different types of anchor organisations. For example:

Frome in Somerset, working through Frome Town Council

Frome became involved in Understory as the result of an existing relationship of working with Onion Collective in Somerset, and seized the opportunity to engage as a pilot site. Frome was unusual for Understory, in that the town brought decades-long history of community engagement, mapping and building activities, and an engaged anchor organisation (the Town Council) with capacity to take on a coordinating role:

“We were interested in what you could do with the map, its labour intensive but as a group of partners we have done mapping exercises before.....these tended to be static and things change really quickly so the idea that you can keep growing maps and interrogating them was attractive to us. It’s so visual, great to see it emerging, very beautiful to see it come together.”

Melody Hunter Evans was the Understory coordinator from Frome Town Council, and shares that one of the many benefits of having so many committed, community driven partners (nearly 200 included on their map) also proved to be a challenge in terms of navigating a very dense, visual map. The results required more interrogation and revisiting to fully understand the picture achieved through the mapping process:

“We are trying in our connections to encourage partnerships rather than lots of tiny organisations going solo with silo’d ways of working. For example, neighbourhood network is linking up different groups doing different bits of work in the same very local areas. The current climate is one of shrinking resources for the same or similar work, so we really are stronger together. The map helped us to see where people interested in the same thing and issues are, e.g. climate action, children and young people etc.”

Frome’s Understory map also revealed that many of the connections within the town are held by a relatively small number of people, many of whom are employed by the Town Council. In other words, the Town Council holds a lot of relational power. This insight has been helpful in thinking about how the Council’s team(s) can help share this power and create dispersed connections so that capacity is increased and shared between more community based organisations and individuals.

Splott, Adamsdown and Tremorfa in Cardiff, working through Green Squirrel

Green Squirrel (GS) is a social enterprise offering practical, creative and inclusive opportunities for people and communities to explore solutions and take action on the climate and ecological emergency. Hannah Garcia from GS was put in touch with the Understory team to build on previous work funded under the People and Place programme, through which GS appointed a community navigator to help build stronger community connections. As a result of this work they have found that people in the area tend to know a lot about their own activities but not so much about other local organisations, even if they are operating in the same neighbourhood. This means that there can be a tendency for some things to happen in silos.

“So it was a good time to do this work. With a new community partnership launching next month, there is a sense of getting to know each other.”

The community mapping exercise for Understory covered Splott, Adamsdown and Tremorfa, part of the southern arc of Cardiff which had previously been demarcated as an area of deprivation. These different communities are historically linked together because of previous Governments Communities First agendas. They are principally old steel-working communities although little industry remains today. As a result, they have experienced a change of identity as well as industry, and now have high numbers of students and people seeking sanctuary, first-time homeowners (who then move out of the area over time) as well as many people who have lived there a long time. Since the Covid-19 lockdowns there has been a boom in grassroots activity filling gaps in provision that have emerged due to successive cuts and closures.

What has been the impact?

Understory has gone from strength to strength over the last two years with examples of benefits and changes observed and experienced at different levels – for participating pilot sites and for the Understory team and the tool overall.

Greater understanding about the nature of power and community

Strategically, the BPT era has enabled the Understory team to develop significant insights and understanding about the nature of “community” and power dynamics within different, place-based communities.

“We took an experimental approach to choosing our places and our partners, and worked with communities of very different scales, and with different types of anchor organisation.....This opened up all sorts of different conversations about the nature of power and community..... It is the strength of a place’s human bridges that hold it together and the physical spaces that support these bridges to connect that often matter most in determining what constitutes a community.”

Developing insights of participating communities and anchor organisations

Each participating community has their own “Understory story” to tell, but it is clear from the final report shared by the Understory team and two example communities that both the process and the mapping tool has generated insights and greater understanding for individuals, local organisations and the community as a whole. Frome has a rich history of community organising and mapping, but the Town Council wanted to understand the relational networks that exist and to identify where there might be gaps. The Understory process and resulting map showed that the Council holds a significant amount of relational power (e.g. the high number of connections and relationships held by community development workers within the Council) – which was a surprise as they imagined this was a much more dispersed network across the town. Although they discovered “less new information” about gaps, they learned significantly more about the nature of these kinds of centres of relational power which they are now wanting to shift.

Local understanding about social connections informing local plans and priorities

The Understory team carried out evaluation work with each of their partners from participating pilot sites which proved useful to each place as well to the ongoing development of the tool.

“This is leaving a meaningful legacy in each place, as even the least engaged partners have said that Understory has informed their strategies and helped them to form new working groups. In the most engaged places it is central to their thinking about their places and their engagement work, and a continual resource for improving their place-based networks.” (Understory final report)

In Frome, local partners involved in the Understory mapping process have used the results of the Understory mapping exercise to inform their own plans including forging new partnerships, completing gap analysis work and submitting funding proposals based on priorities identified.

In Cardiff, Green Squirrel have used the information and insights generated by the mapping process to apply for a large grant in partnership with a local refugee organisation, Oasis, as *“the map showed us that we should be working together. We used this information to apply for a grant from the Building Communities trust and have been awarded a grant that will enable us to work together formally for a number of years”*.

What are the key lessons?

Piloting and experimenting

Understory’s journey has been one of experimentation and learning throughout. “everything about it was experimental”.

This exploratory approach, alongside technical prowess and community knowledge and expertise, proved important in discovering new insights at each local level, harnessing the contributions from participating areas in each pilot phase (e.g. to revise and enhance the tool), and in unearthing rich learning about how communities behave and operate.

Go at the pace of local people and places

Important learning from Understory’s pilot sites has helped to shape the functionality and outputs of Understory’s digital mapping tool. The process of community conversation and ongoing interrogation has also informed the approach (e.g. adding new purpose areas) and the pilots flagged gaps for Onion Collective and Free Ice Cream to address. For example in Frome the number of people focused on SEND identified the need for this to be added to the drop down menu of options (purpose areas). They showed that they were flexible and added extra tools in response to what local participants raised.

Frome and Green Squirrel also highlight the importance of going at the pace of local places and people – thinking carefully about their history, readiness for engagement, and preparing participants for sharing their information and insights openly and safely.

“We had a number of conversations with the Understory team e.g. how it would work, what it meant to be one of the early pilot sites. The map (in Frome) is very big, overwhelming almost, they had to tweak it a bit. But it was lovely to see the visual interplay e.g. when filters are applied.”

“Onion Collective spent time with me (Hannah from Green Squirrel) to help me understand the system and give guidance on running a hybrid event. We had tech buddies on the day to help with the hybrid nature of the initial mapping meeting. We knew the Understory platform was a work in progress ie the experimental nature of the process. I’m really pleased that they helped us organise BSL interpretation on the day and made space for two guide dogs as well!”

Importance of anchor organisations and their capacity

Being able to engage, test and continually improve the Understory tool and process with so many different places generated learning about the importance of having an anchor organisation and understanding their contexts and competing priorities. Some were established, well resourced organisations (e.g. town councils) and others were smaller, community led enterprises reliant on one key person. Being able to work collaboratively with the lynchpin organisation (and person) has been central to the ongoing development of Understory. The next era of Understory (see below) has built into the ability to enhance the capacity of these trusted players to go deeper into understanding the nature of community and better reflect and secure their time and commitment.

Flexible, relationship based funding partners

As with other BPT projects and partners, the Understory team have emphasised the importance of having flexible, supportive funders involved throughout, who take an interest in the ethos as well as progress of the work and who are adaptable when things don't go according to plan, and who have enabled connections with other BPT projects which has led onto other collaborations and shared learning. This assistance extends to emotional as well as practical and financial support.

“We are enormously grateful for the support we've received from the Lottery, and this is not just financial. We have really enjoyed our relationship with our Grants Officer, Lisa Wells.....kindness and understanding when our developer was involved in a serious accident was incredible, and her quick responses and follow up on any questions we've had over the two years have been a huge help.....We also appreciate the resource TNLCF is putting into research and drawing out meta learning across the grantees and we are keen to continue supporting this in any way we can.” (Understory final report)

What next?

The next chapter for Understory is an exciting one, with plans to “scale deep” to explore communities' histories as well as their futures, better understand what supports relationships across differences, and provide resources to enable anchor organisations and under-resourced communities to *“turn their attachments and networks into mobilised community action”*.

As part of this development, the Understory team will be working with four areas (Minehead, Watchett, Dudley and Heanor) to go deeper into understanding connections, relationships and networks, rather than broader i.e. more places. There will also be a greater focus in this era on nature – to understand the ecosystems of communities and also to explore how and where people connect with nature including how this relates to hope and action relating to climate breakdown. Their belief is that if you are part of the journey of noticing and taking action, then you are more likely to have agency and to feel less hopeless.

“It's about understanding place as a really important lever for change.”