



Learning from the Bringing People Together Programme 2021-2024

Final report from the Bringing People Together Learning Partner

NDTi, November 2024





National Development Team for Inclusion

office@ndti.org.uk

With thanks to

With thanks to The National Lottery Community Fund for supporting our work as Learning Partner to the Bringing People Together (BPT) Programme over the last two years; to all the BPT team at The National Lottery Community Fund, in particular our lead contacts, Lisa Wells and Jane Thompson, for your time, advice and observations; to the teams at the Real Farming Trust, National Youth Theatre, the Onion Collective and Free Ice Cream, who so openly and thoughtfully shared their experiences with us as part of the three case studies included in this report; and finally, to all the creative and pioneering people and projects who make up the BPT Programme. This report is based on your shared learning and “dogged determination” to support and explore how communities can thrive, often in the most difficult circumstances.

© 2024 National Development for Inclusion

www.ndti.org.uk



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
1. INTRODUCTION.....	8
1.1 The prologue	8
1.2 What is this report about?	9
1.3 What is the Bringing People Together Programme and what did it set out to achieve?	10
1.4 NDTi’s role as Learning Partner	12
1.5 The contribution of the Bringing People Together Learning Network	12
2. THE EARLY CHAPTERS – PREVIOUS LESSONS	14
2.1 Introduction – about this section.....	14
2.2 What did we find earlier?.....	14
3. BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER – THE STORY CONTINUES	16
3.1 Introduction – about this section.....	16
3.2 Preparing the ground - creating the conditions for change	16

3.3 Methods and approaches – different levels and rich diversity.....	20
3.4 Strengthening relationships and bridging divides	22
3.5 Shifting power towards people and communities.....	30
3.6 Other brief observations	33
4. THREE BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER STORIES.....	37
4.1 Case Study – Assemble (National Youth Theatre).....	37
4.2 Case study – Rural-Urban Twinning Project (The Real Farming Trust).....	40
4.3 Case study – Understory (Onion Collective & Free Ice Cream).....	42
5. THE EPILOGUE – SO WHAT AND WHAT NEXT?	45
5.1 Introduction – about this section.....	45
APPENDIX 1. BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER PROJECTS	50
APPENDIX 2. BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER LEARNING FRAMEWORK.....	54



Executive Summary

“In the most difficult of circumstances, no matter what is going on around the world or in the Middle East, it’s possible to put friendships first, it’s possible to put humanity first and engage with, even have a good time together with someone from the other side.” (Participant in BPT project)

The Bringing People Together (BPT) Programme aimed to increase understanding of **what works in bringing people together**.

The programme was made up of 23 diverse projects, which were funded by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), and ran between autumn 2021 and autumn 2026. The programme funded projects that helped communities to thrive and prosper by creating the conditions, infrastructure and social fabric that enable better and longer lasting ways of bringing people and communities together.

This report draws together the learning from the National Development Team for Inclusion’s (NDTi’s) work as **BPT’s Learning Partner** between early 2022 and late 2024. NDTi worked alongside projects and TNLCF to draw out the learning that is shared below.

BPT has generated insights and understanding about the nature of strengthening communities and connections across the UK. Although the programme was delivered in the most challenging of contexts, BPT has **unlocked some of the ‘abundance’** that exists within communities.

We hope that the report will be **useful to a variety of audiences** including: community leaders and activists, those involved in projects designed to strengthen connections and relationships across divides, community organisations and groups including NGOs and social enterprises as well as businesses, local authorities, funding bodies, designers, entrepreneurs and researchers.

The insights from BPT, summarised below, make **an important contribution** to wider learning on how to bring people and communities together, at a time when this knowledge is more valuable and necessary than ever.

Key Insights

Preparing the ground and creating the conditions for change is a slow and intentional process, and includes the following steps:

- Understanding and mapping the current picture by finding people who share the same goals, existing networks and the connections between them
- Relationship and partnership building, through approaching early conversations with great thoughtfulness and sensitivity
- Building a sense of trust and belonging and setting a positive tone from the outset
- Working with the cycle, being thoughtful about the right point to involve people and understanding the natural ebbs and flows of energy.

The methods and approaches used by BPT projects are richly diverse and operate at different levels, from micro 1:1 conversations to UK-wide developments, but they share some common elements:

- Rooted in shared values and common themes, for example positive, equal relationships, respect, flexibility and responsiveness
- Based on theory and evidence, such as social network theory, but often applied to new contexts and in new ways
- Rich language and creativity as a focus, built upon stories of change, and often with arts and culture as a shared experience
- Avoiding over-engineering and rigid models, leaving room for surprising things to happen and insights to emerge.

Projects highlight important lessons about strengthening relationships and bridging divides:

- Bringing people together with gentleness and compassion, introducing different groups sensitively and creating shared endeavours
- Creating the right environment – safe spaces or brave spaces? While participants need to feel safe, there must also be room for uncomfortable conversations and challenge
- Making creative use of community resources, for example by opening up underused space in supermarkets as a meeting place
- Building and investing in expertise, such as skilled and courageous facilitation, as well as skills in network building, resource sharing and capacity building, and supporting the leaders of the future

- Protecting communities by bringing people together to forge deep emotional connections and countering divisive social media narratives.

BPT has contributed to shifting power towards people and communities, by:

- Talking about where power lies in communities – who has it, how do they use it and to what extent is it shared?
- Supporting people to reduce the power gap, for example by brokering connections between small community groups or offering choice to people who are not used to having agency
- Building for the future by supporting communities to take control and take the work into its next phase.

Creating a supportive environment for change

- Funders play a key role in modelling flexibility, responsiveness and humanity
- A values-led learning network is useful in helping to build and share learning.

What next?

Although BPT is a time-limited funding programme that is drawing to its end, the programme highlights five key lessons about sustaining what works, embedding and using the learning in the future:

- Sustaining what works and maintaining momentum by shifting power to communities
- Investing in key people and roles with explicit responsibility for bringing people together and bridging divides
- Supporting ways of helping to build capacity to bring people together, for example through skills development
- Building expertise and collective understanding by bringing projects and organisations together in learning networks
- Designing in proportional and creative ways of exploring, tracking and understanding impact.



1. Introduction

1.1 The prologue

“The feeling of scarcity leads to competition. This work is about creating abundance.”
(Project lead, Reflection and learning session)

The Bringing People Together Programme (BPT) is a diverse group of projects who have individually and collectively generated insights and understanding about the nature of community, connection and relationships at a number of different levels and scales across the UK.

This report captures the learning from the last three years (2021-2024) of the BPT Programme. It will inform the later stages of the programme, with some projects coming to an end in 2026, as well as wider developments with an interest in bringing people and communities together.

The developments delivered by the 23 BPT projects (see [Appendix 1](#)) so far have happened in the most **challenging of contexts**, with events over the past few years creating a sense of instability and fracturing across the UK. BPT was launched in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the cost of living crisis sparked by the invasion of Ukraine, the continuing conflict in the Middle East and Gaza, and latterly the wave of violent disturbances that affected many towns and cities over the summer of 2024.

Some of the projects have highlighted the **personally demanding nature of this work**, bringing diverse groups and individuals together in a wide range of locations and for different purposes and agendas often with very little capacity or resource beyond the project’s own funding.

At the same time, BPT has **unlocked some of the ‘abundance’** that exists within communities, often unseen and unrecognised by anyone outside those communities. This was demonstrated most clearly by the community responses to some of the challenges highlighted above.

This rich learning shows how initiatives that help to nurture these resources and resourcefulness in communities, and to build bridges across divides are more important than ever; the **lessons from BPT make an important contribution** to wider learning on how to bring people and communities together and what's needed to sustain opportunities and changes brought about over the last two years.

1.2 What is this report about?

This document draws together the lessons from the National Development Team for Inclusion's (NDTi's) work as Learning Partner to The National Lottery Community Fund's Bringing People Together Programme. The programme as a whole began in 2021, but this learning element spanned the period between the spring of 2022 and autumn 2024. Although it is not intended as an evaluation of the impact of the programme, examples of emerging impact form an important element of this report, and in particular the three BPT stories included in Section 4.

We hope it will offer useful insights and lessons to a variety of audiences including: community leaders and activists, those involved in projects designed to strengthen connections and relationships across a diversity of communities of interest, identity and place, community organisations and groups including NGOs and social enterprises as well as more commercial organisations working in this space, local authorities and councils of all shapes and sizes, funders, designers, entrepreneurs and researchers.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- [Part 2: The early chapters – sharing early lessons from the programme \(2021-23\)](#)
- [Part 3: Bringing People Together – the story continues \(2023-24\)](#)
- [Part 4: Three Bringing People Together Stories](#)
- [Part 5: The epilogue – so what and what next \(beyond 2024/25\)?](#)

These sections bring together learning, insights and evidence from several different sources, including the outputs from Reflection and Learning Events and Campfire Cluster sessions with the projects (as described below), case study discussions, conversations with leads from The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), annual and final reports from and other resources developed by the projects, as well as other outputs such as [blogs](#).

This final report consolidates and expands the learning set out in our Year 1 report ([available here](#)) and focuses particularly on those areas where we had least evidence available at that time.

1.3 What is the Bringing People Together Programme and what did it set out to achieve?

TNLCF launched the BPT Programme in March 2021 during a time of unprecedented challenges and change for every community across the UK. In particular, the national lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 were having a profound and continuing impact on people and communities, fundamentally affecting our ability to connect with each other and starkly highlighting widespread inequalities. Since the programme's inception, a series of global and national shocks, as highlighted in the prologue, have added further layers of complexity to the wider environment.

Against this backdrop, TNLCF invested £11 million in funding 23 BPT projects each designed to enable communities to thrive and prosper by creating the conditions, infrastructure and social fabric that enable better and longer lasting ways of bringing people and communities together. Communities refers both to people living in the same area, and people with similar or shared interests, identities or life experiences. BPT is exploring how connections **between** different communities can be strengthened as well as those **within** the same community across different parts of the UK.

BPT is part of TNLCF's UK Portfolio, which seeks to support innovation, test out new ways of doing things and fund activities that are future focused. Learning from BPT has already started to inform the most recent of the [UK Fund](#) programmes, which will continue to invest in projects that help bring diverse communities together, improving relationships between people with different life experiences, enabling people and communities to establish meaningful online connections, and support people to influence the future of their communities.

The BPT Programme was designed to fund projects that:

- build **connections across communities, not just within existing communities**, and foster a positive sense of belonging by reducing divisive 'us and them' attitudes
- support and explore **what's needed to connect communities** and enables stronger collaboration to bring people together and keep people together – for example, community infrastructure like networks, shared resources or coordinated approaches, or supporting infrastructure organisations that support the work of other groups
- focus on creating **longer-term change**. This could mean a focus on improving the conditions available to communities to help create this change (instead of only delivering services or a series of public events)

- **build collective action** and strengthen communities' own abilities to have control, influence and agency on the things that matter most to them.

In addition, TNLCF was keen to support projects that were designed to:

- deliver across **at least two UK countries** (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) – working in a network or partnership
- be **bold and experimental** responses to bringing people together using new approaches, or a new combination of approaches
- demonstrate **clear positive impacts** for communities, including those communities most in need of support
- have a clear focus on **equality, diversity and inclusion**
- continually **learn and adapt** as they go.

Given BPT's strong focus on innovation and flexibility, The National Lottery Community Fund anticipated from the outset that projects' activities and outcomes were likely to develop, emerge or change over the timeframe of their project. This flexible approach has remained a hallmark of the programme and is also mirrored in NDTi's activities as a Learning Partner.

As the programme has evolved, five overarching themes have emerged as important elements to consider in the work of projects and the programme overall. These are also reflected in the Learning Framework ([Appendix 2](#)). The learning and insights shared in this report are focused on these key themes, as follows:

- 1) Creating the conditions for change (and understanding the contexts within which projects are operating and people are living their lives)
- 2) Experimenting with a wide range of different approaches and methods for bringing people together (taking account of these contexts and conditions)
- 3) Fostering a sense of trust and belonging (so that people can engage and participate in opportunities for coming together)
- 4) Strengthening relationships between people and communities from different backgrounds (including those whose voices are seldom heard)
- 5) Shifting power towards people and communities (away from institutions and those with formal roles).

1.4 NDTi's role as Learning Partner

In January 2022, TNLCF commissioned NDTi to work alongside the programme as a Learning Partner with the following remit:

“A Learning Partner to enable and amplify the learning from the programme. They will connect and convene the projects (both current and new grant holders), design a learning approach, generate on-going learning and insights from the programme, and share openly with other organisations that work to bring communities together – including community organisations, funders, think tanks and government.”¹

The learning partner role comprised three key elements, each of which was considered in detail in our Year 1 report:

- Build and facilitate a **strong peer network** (the BPT Learning Network) across grant-holders and their key partners (the contribution of which is discussed below)
- Generate **learning and insights** across the projects and programme (set out in Parts 2 and 3)
- Communicate learning and **engage a wider audience** (this report is a key route for doing this).

1.5 The contribution of the Bringing People Together Learning Network

The first step in building a peer, or learning, network across projects was to convene an initial, participative on-line workshop session to explore:

- **What** the projects hoped collectively to achieve and **why** (including the wider drivers and contexts for change)
- **How** they aspired to work together, by agreeing a set of principles for the network
- **Why** being a programme of projects matters in generating and sharing learning about what works (and what doesn't work) for wider audiences with an interest in communities of all shapes and sizes.

¹ Invitation to Tender for the BPT Learning Partner role

These early discussions produced a one page, co-designed learning framework ([see Appendix 2](#)) and guiding principles, and an overarching structure to guide our thinking as a Learning Partner. These principles and elements also influenced the content and design of future learning events and activities. Discussions at the initial workshop made it clear that participants had strong views about the style of learning events, which they wanted to be informal, supportive, free-flowing and creative, with sufficient opportunities for small group discussion, more intimate connections and deep thinking. The learning network was made up of three complementary elements, each co-designed with projects:

a) **Reflection and Learning sessions**

These on-line meetings brought together all the BPT projects three times per year. They featured an outline programme made up of a series of whole group and breakout sessions based on topics and themes emerging from Campfire cluster meetings (see below) and the preceding reflection and learning session. Each meeting included an open space, small group session for projects to raise and explore any current ideas, issues and challenges, and ended with participants assessing how well the network was operating according to the guiding principles from the BPT learning framework ([Appendix 2](#)).

b) **Campfire cluster meetings**

Campfire clusters were named by one of the project leads, who wanted to recreate the feel of an informal, story-telling discussion with friends and family gathered around a fire. There were four groups, each bringing together people from around four projects, which met without a formal agenda shortly before each Reflection and Learning session. Emerging themes were explored as part of these larger meetings that followed. Cluster discussions were always engaging, lively, informative and generated rich insights as well as providing a means for project teams to connect with one another in more direct ways than larger events. Key insights and reflections from cluster discussions and the reflection and learning sessions were drawn together in occasional [blogs](#) as well as informing Learning Reports.

c) **A digital platform – Slack workspace**

At the start of our work as BPT's learning partner, we set up a virtual workspace for the Learning Network on the digital platform called Slack. The aim of this 'Bringing Learning Together' Slack workspace was to allow people to stay connected in an informal way throughout the duration of the programme. The space has worked well for storing project related documents, sharing ideas and posting information about podcasts, news or events, and was used alongside email communication and online events and meetings. Generally it worked less well as a forum for ongoing dialogue and exploration of ideas and issues shared by projects. In the main this was due to competing demands of the projects' own fora, networks and online platforms in addition to the operational demands of project delivery.



2. The early chapters – previous lessons

2.1 Introduction – about this section

This section shares a summary of the lessons and examples set out in our year 1 report, which highlighted observations and insights from our first year of working alongside the BPT Programme leads and projects. These are shared again here for ease, and can be accessed in full from our initial report [here](#).

2.2 What did we find earlier?

At the time of writing our first report in June 2023, the programme was already helping to bring people and communities together in an exceptionally challenging context, with funded projects reporting many signs of change, for example:

- **forging connections across divides** by creating new opportunities for rich, important conversations that help people increase mutual understanding and explore difficult issues
- **increasing positive micro-interactions** between people, leading to cumulative change
- **strengthening a sense of belonging** - what is sometimes referred to as social fabric or the glue that can help unite people around a common goal, shared vision, sense of purpose or passion

Some examples suggested that through their inclusive approach and design, projects were creating ripples of influence and having a wider, sometimes unexpected, impact upon people, places, organisations and the community infrastructure such as:

- **building new partnerships and relationships** with other organisations, groups and networks across sectors as well as different communities
- supporting the third sector and businesses **to share scarce resources** for the benefit of communities
- helping to **shift power to communities and people** with more people stepping up to be local leaders for change
- **influencing what others do**, in particular statutory bodies, such as councils or transport services.

The projects were also learning how to bring people together, identifying the critical success factors as well as tackling barriers that can get in the way of progress, including:

- **investing in relationships, building trust and finding the spark** that will ignite action and motivate people to take part
- **taking time to lay the foundations at the outset**, including finding and engaging the right people, identifying a compelling reason to connect, mapping what is already in place and co-designing what needs to happen
- increasing the skills and confidence of the **people and roles that help to reinforce the social fabric**
- **working flexibly and responsively** as circumstances and contexts change
- this flexibility **extending to funders** who listen and respond alongside the change makers, as part of the supportive environment we refer to in section 3 of this report.
- recognising the factors that can make it difficult to bring people together, including **the current context**, with the aftermath of the pandemic compounded by the cost of living crisis, and **friction and suspicion within partnerships**.
- **developing strategies and approaches** to maximise their chances of success by understanding the context and working in ways that make the most of the factors that enable change.



3. Bringing People Together – the story continues

3.1 Introduction – about this section

This section adds to and builds on the lessons summarised in section 2, focusing primarily on new learning and insights rather than repeating our earlier work. It explores those elements of the learning framework ([Appendix 2](#)) where we had less evidence when we produced our first report and therefore wanted to investigate further. It also looks at issues that were of particular interest to TNLCF, so that the learning points set out below can contribute towards shaping the new UK Fund outlined earlier.

We have illustrated our findings with examples and quotes from the wide range of evidence sources we have brought together to generate these findings.

This section looks at the following areas, based on the five key themes shared earlier:

- **Preparing the ground** - creating the conditions for change
- **Methods and approaches** – different levels and rich diversity
- **Strengthening relationships** and bridging divides
- **Shifting power** towards people and communities
- **Other observations**

The earlier theme of **fostering a sense of trust and belonging** is included as a cross-cutting theme within the first four themes.

3.2 Preparing the ground - creating the conditions for change

“We need to reflect on how much power and capability civil society already has, and how we can best complement this.”
(Project lead, Reflection and learning session)

Our last report found that the way in which projects approached the early stages of their work had a profound influence on its development and success. This section looks in more detail at the learning from those crucial early weeks and months.

For most projects, the initial stages took much longer than expected, as they worked through the steps described below. They found that creating the conditions for change needed to be a slow, intentional process. Although many of the lessons included here came from the group of projects that were working in a geographical place (place-based initiatives), they also apply to those that were working nationally, and/or with communities of interest, as described in [3.3, Methods and approaches](#).

a) **Understanding and mapping the terrain**

Projects that aim to bring people together need to locate and build on the ‘abundance’ that already exists in the communities where they operate - such as existing networks, assets and strengths. BPT projects that were working in a geographical area therefore spent their early phase mapping what was already in place with similar or related aims, including the key organisations and community groups, networks, people and places, and just as importantly, the connections between them.

Projects emphasised the importance of dialogue to make sense of ‘*apparent and unseen connections*’. They used a range of different and evolving tools to build their local understanding of communities, of their local histories and contexts, and of the relationships that underpin them. These ranged from visual or spreadsheet-based approaches, to the sophisticated digital tool developed as part of Understory ([Case study 4.3](#)), in which collectively building a community map is the starting point for a conversation about how people see their community, helping to build agency, diversity and resilience.

This process of building deep understanding of a place needs to be repeated each time an initiative is extended to a new location, as a way of shaping replication. As we noted in our first report, some projects quickly learned that a model that works well in one area is unlikely to transfer directly to another area without adaptation, where the local context may be very different.

b) **Relationship and partnership building**

“It’s 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.”

(Understory end of grant report)

As noted above, the mapping process will highlight the people who hold the key to finding and involving the fellow travellers needed to progress and embed the work. Projects referred to these key people in different ways, including:

- **Community gatekeepers**
- **Community gateways**
- **Super-connectors**
- **Community activists.**

Projects approached these early conversations with great thoughtfulness and sensitivity, starting positively, valuing the time and contribution of local people, and being clear about about how they might benefit from engaging, for example through training and development support, being part of new networks, or improved access to funding and other resources. Showing investment in and commitment to the place was important, to counter perceptions that projects are only interested and engaged for as long as their funding lasts. Above all, though, projects spoke about the importance of showing authenticity and respect from the outset.

c) **Building a sense of trust and belonging**

“These initiatives can help communities not just reimagine ourselves, but also celebrate who we are.”
 (Participant in Communities Co-Creating Sustainable Tourism project, Scottish Enterprise Academy (SEA), quoted in SEA’s progress report)

As described in the next section, many BPT projects relied on well-designed and expertly facilitated groups, gatherings and events as the most common mechanism for bringing people together. The style and approach adopted by projects, as well as their focus, was crucial in setting a tone which helped to develop trust among participants, and in the longer-term to build a sense of belonging and pride in their community, as highlighted in the quote above.

Some of the lessons from BPT projects on how to build trust and a sense of belonging were to:

- Be **transparent**, modelling openness and good listening
- Invest in **conversations** from the beginning
- Work together to agree **clear tasks and expectations**
- Agree **shared priorities** and work together on these
- Encourage **creativity and curiosity** – about each other, why people are there and what they are bringing
- Use the **power of small things** and everyday activities – for example, the power of a cup of tea.



Example 1

Learning points from **Building Capacity to imagine and shape futures of connection, hope and possibility** (New Constellations) about bringing together a diverse group include:

- The importance of bringing together a **consistent group** over a long period to build trust and embed learning
- Clear agreement about **expectations**
- Spending time in **preparing and debriefing** participants

d) Working with the cycle

“Take your time, take a breath before you engage.”
(Project lead, campfire cluster)

All projects and initiatives have a natural cycle. In our first report we found, for example, that at least one BPT project designed its work in line with the seasons of the year, and the ebbs and flows of energy that these typically represent.

Projects highlighted the importance of pacing the work by starting positively, with a burst of energy, while acknowledging that there are moments when this is harder to maintain, such as the point when the initial visioning phase moves into the task of delivery. They also shared their experiences of and tips for sustaining momentum over time – connecting with others in similar roles to themselves (such as through the learning network) being a major source of sustenance.

Others spoke of the need to think carefully about the right moment to engage people. For example, for one project, engagement took place too early, so enthusiasm had waned and some people had moved on by the time their active involvement was needed.

3.3 Methods and approaches – different levels and rich diversity

This section summarises the rich diversity of methods and approaches that BPT projects used in their work, seeking to answer the question – **how do you bring people together?**

While projects used a range of approaches and methods, all of these were rooted in several common themes which are set out below.

- BPT projects had a set of **shared values and beliefs** at their heart, with a strong underpinning focus on, for example positive, equal relationships, respect, flexibility and responsiveness
- Many projects were steeped in **existing knowledge, theory and evidence**, including philosophical approaches (such as social network theory) across disciplines and sectors, often applying theoretical frameworks to new contexts or settings.
- Linked to this, **language** played an important role for BPT projects, often richly metaphorical and with an emphasis on stories. Many of the quotes included in this report illustrate this. Projects found new ways of describing their work, reflecting their aims, ethos and working style, and signalling that they were offering something different and inclusive.
- Encouraging **creativity and using culture and the arts** as a way of connecting people was a feature of several projects: *‘Seeing the young people and volunteers working together each week using theatre as a means to share ideas and express themselves creatively has been a reminder of how people can connect through the arts.’* (Assemble Year 1 Report, National Youth Theatre)

[Appendix 1](#) lists the projects and organisations that made up the BPT Programme. The following map illustrates the range of methods employed (the “how” of BPT), the levels, scope and scale of projects (the “where of BPT) and the central, underpinning values and beliefs referred to above (the “why” of BPT). The map also refers to cross-cutting areas which draw these different dimensions together.

Map of Methods & Mechanisms Used in Bringing People Together

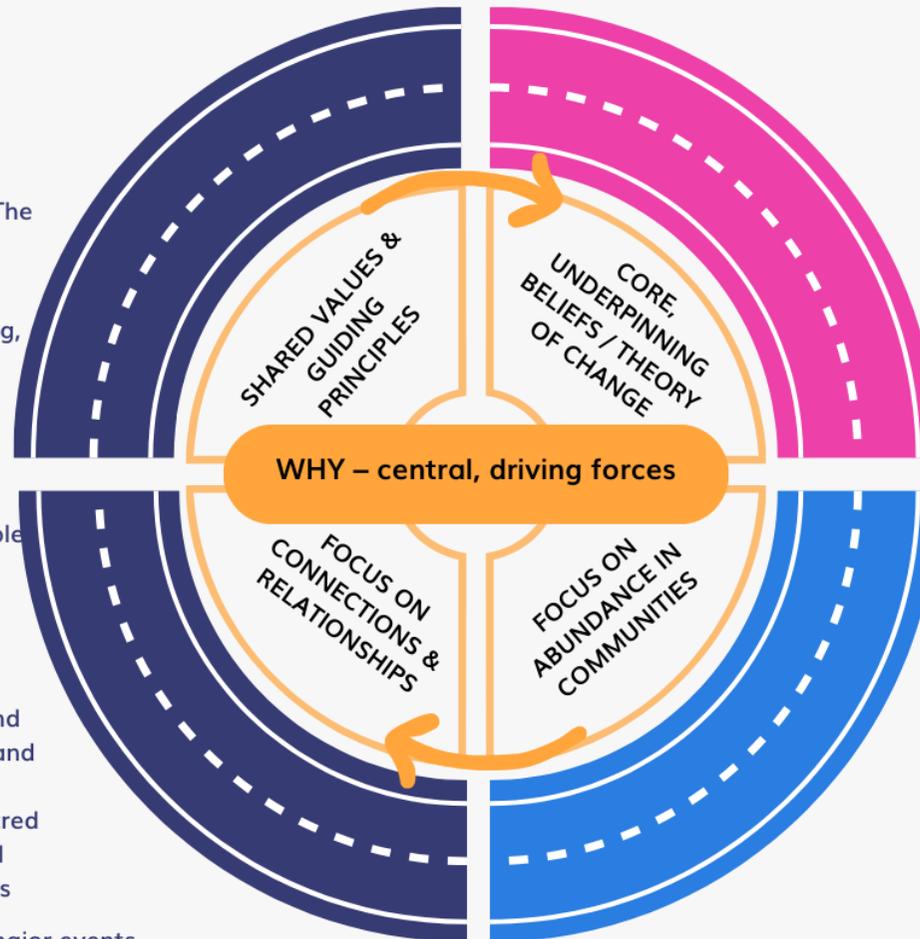
HOW – ways of doing things (links to level, size & scope)

MICRO – pairing (individual & small groups), exchanges, small group conversations
 e.g. Rural/Urban Twinning Project, The Roots Programme, Tough Options Moving Forward, Essential Mix

PLACE BASED – community mapping, community workshops, visioning exercises, re-imagining place, strengthening community infrastructure
 e.g. Understory, Design Differently, Communities Co-creating Sustainable Tourism, Together We Are

NETWORKS – producing & curating resources, developing programmes, hosting events
 e.g. Building Capacity to imagine and shape futures of connection, hope and possibility, Good Grief Connects, Infrastructure for Relationship-Centred Practice, Creating Intergenerational Communities, Steps to Togetherness

NATIONAL – campaigns (linked to major events or themes), encouraging events/activities/activism/ volunteering
 e.g. Big Help Out, More in Common Partnerships, The Together Campaign



WHERE – level, size & scope of project

- Micro – individual, group, neighbourhood or smaller
- Place-based (communities of place)
- Networks (communities of interest)
- National – each UK nation and UK-wide

CROSS CUTTING

CROSS CUTTING APPROACHES:

- Micro / Place-based – e.g. Local Inclusivity Networks, Pride Groups, Rural/Urban Twinning
- Place-based / Networks – e.g. Together We Are
- Micro / Networks – e.g. Building Capacity to imagine and shape futures of connection, Tough Options Moving



There was one over-riding, important lesson that project leads shared about these key elements (i.e. the design and methods used to achieve their aims) which was: **don't over-engineer or over-design your approach and methods - leave room to allow for surprising things to happen and insights to emerge:**

“(We’re) doing things we couldn’t have predicted at the beginning, if we’d been more prescriptive it wouldn’t be working in the same way, not doing what communities value.”

(Rural/Urban Twinning Project case study, The Real Farming Trust)

3.4 Strengthening relationships and bridging divides

“By meeting others, we not only discover new life stories and experiences, but also experience a new story of our own.”

(Rural/Urban Twinning Project, Year 1 report, The Real Farming Trust)

“People often hadn’t thought about the type and depth of relationships they have.”

(Project lead, Campfire cluster)

As noted in the previous section, relational approaches lie at the heart of the BPT Programme. Projects brought together individuals and groups who would not otherwise have encountered each other or may have viewed each other with suspicion. Divides across religion, ethnicity, cultures, generations, class and geography, including urban and rural areas, were all tackled by BPT projects. This section looks at what the projects have learned about how to strengthen connections between people and communities especially those from different backgrounds and with diverse experiences, and what is needed to build bridges across divides.

Bringing people together with gentleness and compassion

“When (underserved communities) do come together for first time, this creates a source of positive energy which has a collective impact. Connections are made.” (Project lead, Reflection and learning event)

This point links to earlier lessons shared about the importance of establishing a positive and respectful tone from the outset. Projects spoke about the very practical aspects of establishing relationships by going to visit people, community groups and networks rather than just sending an email invitation to make initial contact. They also highlighted the need for gentleness and sensitivity when introducing different groups at the beginning of their work together, creating the right environment, as described in the next section, and creating shared endeavours.

In at least one case, partners and key players in a BPT project included the private sector, who required a very different approach. In this example, the project's likely benefit to the business and how it was perceived by the community was important to emphasise.

Projects also continued asking the question – who is **not** here?

“Always keep in mind, who is not here? You can engage and work with people who show up but most people are excluded from these spaces, reach out, keep asking.” (Twinning project case study, The Real Farming Trust)



Example 2

47% of organisations who participated in the **Big Help Out** (The Royal Voluntary Service) reported that some or all of their new volunteers were from different backgrounds to their existing volunteers.

However in future, there should be a greater emphasis on involving small, diverse grass roots organisations:

“You probably didn't get enough of the kind of, the really local, what's going on in my street type opportunities, probably because the idea was new.”

Creating the right environment for difficult conversations to happen – safe spaces or brave spaces?

“The spaces also provide a unique opportunity for participants to step out of their echo chambers within their own community. Challenging, yet open spaces, where young people feel capable of expressing their views in respectful and facilitated spaces, is particularly important amongst a hostile social and political atmosphere in the UK.”
(Tough Options Moving Forward, Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine (FODIP) end of year report)

Many BPT projects brought people together in different kinds of group conversations, as described in section 3.3, above, as the main element of their approach. Creating an environment in which important, and potentially difficult discussions could occur was therefore a priority.

We explored this issue in more depth with project leads at a Reflection and Learning event, as the idea of ‘**safe spaces**’ was a recurrent theme in the learning network’s discussions.

Discussions at this event highlighted that while feeling safe was a prerequisite, it would perhaps be more accurate to describe the environment projects were aiming to create as ‘**brave spaces**’, that allowed for disagreement and challenge:

“It’s not about being coddled, or a place to hide – it’s a space where you can bring your best self.”
(Project lead, Reflection and learning session)

Key questions and learning points on safe-brave spaces are set out below.

What is a safe-brave space?

- An open space, where participants influence what is discussed
- It can be a physical place where people already gather, or a dispersed network where people have a shared identity (solidarity spaces)
- It can be virtual, although this can be harder to achieve
- Practical factors are important, such as privacy, no interruptions, agreed codes of behaviour
- Who gets to decide what is safe?

How do you establish a safe-brave space?

- Doing the groundwork and building trust
- Modelling values – kindness, empathy and respect
- Facilitating sensitively – mirroring back, clarifying

What happens in a safe-brave space?

- People can speak honestly and openly, and can share conflicting ideas
- People can make mistakes without fear
- People learn from the experience of others

How can we make safe-brave spaces sustainable?

- Engaging the people who run spaces to get them to be part of the solution in future
- Sharing tools and building capacity
- Nurturing and supporting the people who hold these spaces for others.

Making creative use of community resources

Some BPT projects made creative use of the assets and resources that already exist in communities as a way of bringing people together, for example (Unlocking New Social Opportunities in Shops, Neighbourly Lab) working with supermarket chains to open up under-used areas in the stores as new community spaces, for people to meet and to get advice and support from community organisations.

Others found innovative ways of reaching groups who may typically be under-served, by going out to the spaces they are likely to use.



Example 3

Together We Are (Groundswell Project) in Lewisham brought together people from across the community in a series of large scale events – including **17,800 people at a Job Fayre at Millwall FC**, before a match. The event was advertised via the screens in local chicken shops, which are used by 80% 16-34 year olds and 70% ethnically diverse audiences. As a result - 125 people signed up to volunteer and over 150 people received job offers.

Building and investing in expertise

“Some aspects (of the course) were hard .. gruelling .. because it was painful. But it was a shared and collective pain, and also had hope embedded within it.”

(Participant in Connecting Hearts, Connecting Minds, Connecting Community project (Plan for Peace) quoted in their evaluation report)

“We under-estimated the experience you need to facilitate a community conversation.”

(Project lead, cluster conversation)

Bridging divides relies on people and roles who are tasked with reaching across and helping others to connect. For example, projects such as **Together We Are** (Groundswell Project) recruited a team of community connectors, whose role included brokering connections between small, under-resourced community groups, linking up isolated communities and making better use of scarce resources. Both **Together We Are** (Groundswell Project) and **Steps to Togetherness** (Civil Society Consulting CIC) highlighted the role of small, community led, grassroots organisations and their invaluable role in supporting underserved groups. Both projects’ activities involve strengthening these groups through network building, resource sharing and capacity building.

Bridging divides also relies on highly skilled people, in particular experienced, sensitive and courageous facilitators. In some projects, leads underestimated their own considerable skills in facilitating difficult community conversations, discovering that their assumptions about people in the community being available and able to step up and take on this role were ambitious.

Some BPT projects were focused on developing the skills and capacity of community leaders, or the leaders of tomorrow, supporting them to develop a style of leadership that values difference and engenders trust and confidence, as highlighted in the Example 4 below.



Example 4

Participants in the **Connecting Hearts, Connecting Minds, Connecting Community (Plan for Peace)** achieved the following shifts as a result of taking part. They were:

- **more confident in taking action** and dealing with challenges as a Changemaker (from 12% rating themselves as very confident at the start to 71% at the end)
- **less stressed** (from 24% feeling stressed at the start to 15% still feeling stressed by the end)
- **more supported** (from 5% feeling very supported at the start to 44% by the end, with no one still feeling completely unsupported)
- **less overwhelmed** (reducing from 42% feeling very overwhelmed at the beginning to 7% at the end)
- **more able to take a stand** on issues that they feel are important (from 59% of people feeling confident at the start to 83% by the end)
- **more able to channel their anger** (from 41% who felt confident at the start to 68% by the end)

“This course has made me think a lot about how I manage conflict and engage with conflict around me. It has helped me to see that I have a number of skills that could be transferable to do more community work.”

(Participant in Connecting Hearts, Connecting Minds, Connecting Community project (Plan for Peace) quoted in their evaluation report)



Example 5

In Glasgow, the **Together We Are** (Groundswell Project) connector helped a local man to set up a football league to bring different minority groups together and help with some of the intercommunity tensions.

Men of 12 different nationalities who would normally not play together - Pakistani, Indian, Kurdish, Somali, Eritrean, Sudanese, Lebanese, Iranian, Albanian, Polish, Scottish & Chinese are now playing weekly.

“I wanted to set up this football league for men like me, who don’t have outlets to deal with their issues and need to channel that energy into sports rather than aggression towards those around us. I approached (the local connector) to get it off the ground. (Together We Are (Groundswell Project))

Protecting communities by bringing people together

“Optimism of hope within a dark time is possible while genuine conversations are maintained.”

(Participant in FODIP’s Tough Options Moving Forward project, quoted in their end of year report)

“Online hate speech is shallow. These projects work on a deeper level about connection and belonging, a deeper emotional level.” (Project lead, Reflection and learning session)

The riots that affected towns and cities in England in the summer of 2024 revealed the vulnerability of some places to racist rhetoric, much of it online, and the fragility of community connections in some areas.

As noted in our prologue, however, the peaceful demonstrations that followed the disorders, as well as community responses to the riots, told a rather different and much more positive story about community.

Projects emphasised the difficulty of working in a space where there is a lot of background noise that can divide people. This means it is even more important to gain trust, and devote time to building relationships. The above quote suggests that the thoughtful work carried out by BPT projects is likely to have a protective impact on the people and communities they involve. Nowhere is that more evident than in the Tough Options Moving Forward project (FODIP).



Example 6

Tough Options Moving Forward (FODIP) has brought together two groups of 35 young people (aged between about 16 and 25), all of whom are people of faith of varying degrees. One group is based in Manchester and the North West of England (focusing on the conflict between Israel and Palestine) and the other is in Northern Ireland (focusing on experiences and legacies of the Northern Ireland Troubles).

The project needed to pause, take stock and flex its approach following the events of 7th October 2023. The emotional impact on participants has been considerable, so some of the planned activities were postponed or redesigned. For example, refreshing critical thinking skills and conflict awareness was important, as was presenting more nuanced perspectives that challenged an ‘us’ and ‘them’ view of the conflict. However, it is striking that participants have maintained informal contact throughout:

“This sense of community and mutual support is a significant indicator of the programme’s success in building lasting relationships beyond the formal sessions.”

(FODIP’s Tough Options Moving Forward project, End of Year Report, March 2024)

As one young participant commented:

“In the most difficult of circumstances, no matter what is going on around the world or in the Middle East, it’s possible to put friendships first, it’s possible to put humanity first and engage with, even have a good time together with someone from the other side. FODIP helps facilitate this.”

3.5 Shifting power towards people and communities

“What happens when it shifts from being allowed in a space to being our space?”
(Assemble Case study, The National Youth Theatre)

By their nature, projects and programmes such as BPT are in place for only a limited time, sowing the seeds of a longer term shift. If they are to be a catalyst for transformational change and if learning is to be embedded, the project vision and activities have to be valued, owned and led by local people after the project has formally come to an end. This demands a shift in power, towards people and communities. But BPT projects found that many of the people and community groups they worked with feel that they have little agency or ability to influence what happens within their community. Projects have therefore focused on building the confidence and capacity to engage with partners who may appear to be more powerful (such as local authorities or businesses).

Talking about where power lies

BPT projects have highlighted new insights about power relationships in communities through their conversations – who has the power, how do they use it and to what extent is it shared? For example, Understory found that ‘super-connectors’ (the people who are extremely well connected and form part of many different networks) can sometimes keep their knowledge and connections to themselves, rather than sharing it widely with others.



Example 7

Understory (The Onion Collective, [see case study 4.3](#)) works with partners in a place to map and explore the connections between people and organisations. This has opened up *different conversations about the nature of power and community*. In some cases, key organisations have used the process as a way of thinking about how best to distribute power more equally. For example, in Frome, the Town Council has used the Understory map to see where power is held and concentrated, and to use the network to support a rippling out of a democratic, collective engagement process.

Supporting people to reduce the power gap

“We use stories and lived experience to influence people who have power.”
(Project lead, Reflection and learning session)

BPT projects, via particular people and roles, are empowering people and organisations by supporting them to feel that they may have more power and agency than they realise, particularly if they work together, and by challenging the sense of powerlessness that many people feel.

But shifting power depends on key people who can help the shift happen, for example by capacity building or by brokering connections across small community groups, or between people from different backgrounds. Projects spoke about the role of allies in helping to achieve shifts of power, as well as the value of stories and lived experience in achieving change.

A power shift also depends on people having the time and capacity to engage. Projects found that small amounts of funding can help enormously in building capacity and respecting the contribution of people and small groups.



Example 8

Social Enterprise Academy’s **Communities Co-creating Sustainable Tourism** project is working with communities with high levels of tourism in Scotland and Wales to explore what a model that works for local people might look like:

“People are approaching us as a directly managed organisation asking for change and more control. So, we need to not just accept how tourism happens but how can we influence it” (Learner, West Coast)



Example 9

Young disabled people who previously had little power or agency, through the National Youth Theatre's **Assemble** project ([see case study 4.1 for more details](#)) are taking power and making bold choices for themselves, often for the first time in their lives.

This has been achieved through:

- Introducing the idea of choice
- Giving choices – ‘Do you want to do A or B?’
- Building connections between young people and volunteers

Building for the future

“The people we support and their lived experience informs the project. The dream would be that they run the project.”
(Project lead, Reflection and learning session)

Shifting power to people and communities is an important way of making this work sustainable in the long term, as described above. While lived experience shapes and informs projects when they are underway, in the future it is the people who actively engage who will hold the legacy and who will one day continue and lead the work, which may take time to achieve a lasting impact. BPT projects have found that there is an appetite for communities to take control and direct what happens next. For this to happen, projects need to:

- **Find your champions** and potential leaders as early as you can, and support and train them to continue
- Continually **think about whose voices are heard, who is actively involved**, and who is not (either heard or involved).
- **Find funding** to invest in small groups and grassroots organisations to be able to engage, as well as keeping things going.

3.6 Other brief observations

As well as exploring the lessons about the four major themes set out above, a small number of other key issues emerged from our analysis. These were all touched upon in our last report, have been amplified over the last 12 months, and are highlighted below.

Creating a supportive environment

BPT projects need a supportive environment to flourish, and this point featured strongly in the Programme's Learning Framework ([Appendix 2](#)). Our last report highlighted the contribution of funders, as well as the value of projects having a way of sharing experience and learning together. Both issues have been continuing themes of the most recent phase of our work.

Projects frequently emphasised the key **role of funders**, as part of the wider system, in modelling flexibility, responsiveness and humanity. TNLCF was seen as unusually flexible and supportive in their approach to projects, and their deep understanding of complex, community-based programmes such as BPT was really valued. At least one project, who had worked with TNLCF before, commented that they would not have approached any other funder to support their work, such was the confidence they placed in TNLCF's Grant Managers.

Projects also continued to highlight the **benefit of a learning network** based on mutuality, learning together and curiosity. Over time, the BPT Learning Network developed and flexed to accommodate the arrival of new projects and the departure of others as projects came to an end. However, the values and principles that were agreed in the Learning Framework from the outset continued to underpin and guide the BPT Learning Network's discussions and events. This provided a strong and consistent framework, even though the membership shifted over time.

Learning from things that haven't happened as anticipated

BPT projects on numerous occasions talked about the importance of learning in relation to what doesn't work and/ or wasn't working as much as adopting an appreciative enquiry approach where the focus is on learning from what works. In addition to the brave and safe spaces afforded through the Learning Network, where projects were able to share positive and challenging experiences, some projects' annual and final reports also provided honest insights into insurmountable difficulties that they encountered.

This means that BPT also has some important learning about what does not work in this kind of work, which we summarise below:

- **What works in one place or locality does not always translate to another**, new area without first paying attention to the unique characteristics, cultures, assets and challenges of that place. Context is everything, and a small number of projects did not initially realise the importance of getting to know and understand new places and their priorities when they moved beyond their original location or locus/focus. Parachuting into an area with good intentions, well researched tools/resources and a plan is not enough to embed what has been found to work elsewhere. You need to find the passion, priorities and people that matter to each and every place relevant to your project's aims and activities.
- Depending on one or two people to lead the work who do not have the dedicated time, capacity or who do not have the necessary experience of working with a number of different and diverse communities. These individuals may well have passion, dedication and location specific knowledge and experience, but they also need to have **protected time and relevant facilitation and motivational skills** that are transferable to other places and cultures.
- Not having contingencies in mind, and/or the **flexibility to adapt when things do not go according to plan**. All projects faced similar challenges associated with the fall out of the Covid-19 pandemic, including delays, illness, social anxiety, lack of venues and/or staff – as well as pressures associated with the cost of living crisis and other preoccupations affecting communities and organisations. A very small number of projects with specific aims and ways of doing things found that their capacity to flex and adapt was limited compared to those that designed in experimentation and curiosity; a “let's see what happens and why” ethos rather than “let's capture how people respond here” mindset.

These lessons were experienced in some degree by many projects, and it was only a handful who struggled with all of these issues or found it hard to achieve their aims due to a combination of these and other factors specific to their project.

‘Capturing the magic’

“(There have been) interesting conversations about external evaluation v self generated evaluation. It's interesting that this is still really live.” (TNLCF reflection session)

BPT projects were all expected to evaluate the impact of their work as a condition of funding, and they approached evaluation in **very different ways**. Most used external evaluators, in some cases to capture stories and qualitative evidence to ‘capture the magic’ and to bring together ‘beautiful, beautiful stuff’.

Other projects felt **over-evaluated** and at times this could detract from delivering the project – ‘I need to be there and be present, rather than always capturing ...’

A common message that arose through discussions at a Reflection and Learning session focusing on impact, was the importance of using evaluation approaches that are tailored to reflect the unique nature of each project, rather than methods that are either ‘flavour of the month’ or which use off the shelf tools that offer little flexibility or creativity.



Example 10

[Photovoice](#) is a recognised participatory research method. Participants take snapshots of their experience and then add comments, ideally in a group sharing photos with the researcher. For the Rural/Urban Twinning Project, The Real Farming Trust contracted the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University to bring their research skills to the Twinning partners, and to write reports from what they hear and see on the Photovoice days.

“We have chosen this method because it is accessible for people irrespective of literacy or articulacy. It is levelling; everyone participates as an equal. It immediately engages some of the people who might learn from the data generated, i.e. the people on the ground. The activity itself is often community building and engaging (much more accessible than an academic report). It allows participants to communicate whatever matters to them, without the filters of funders or researchers or managers. It also results in a set of authentic materials that projects can use to ‘give voice’ to their participants. The method makes sense to participants and allows them to comment on the experiential issues that we are interested in; Did they meet new people? Did they feel confident in a new space? Did they feel welcome?” (Rural/Urban Twinning Project lead).

One of the aims of this method is to stimulate dialogue amongst the community. For example, when participants share their photos with each other and the reasons why they took the photo, it allows others in the group to hear these narratives and learn from each other in dialogue. As such, each Twin will use photovoice to document their experiences of visiting their Twinning site

“What makes the method interesting is that it places power in the hands of participants/community to tell their story through photos”.

This example and the above reflections from the BPT Learning Network illustrate the importance of capturing impact in a proportionate way, that is **embedded in practice and values stories of change**, and which **reveals new learning and understanding** about what works in bringing people together.

“...it [evaluation work with each partner] has uncovered interesting findings about our places and how civil society is working across the country; the necessity of good relations between formal and informal civil society and how investing in this work pays dividends. It has uncovered place based action that is otherwise invisible, and shown how communities have come together to self heal in difficult times...” (Understory final report)



4. Three Bringing People Together stories

This section summarises three, project-based case studies, which describe the journey of projects through the BPT Programme over time, what they have learned along the way, and the impact they have had; and bring to life the discussion on the four main themes explored in Section 3 of this report. These themes underpin all the case studies, and in addition, they illustrate the broad scope of the BPT Programme by their focus on bringing people together across different dimensions, including rural-urban, diverse communities, disability and other protected characteristics. One of the case studies also shares a particular method and approach for generating insight and understanding about local, place based communities.

We selected these three projects because they illustrate some of the different methods and levels of working set out in the graphic in [section 3.3](#). They also reflect different timeframes of the BPT Programme (Understory began in 2021/22 and completed in 2023/24; Assemble and the Rural/Urban Twinning Project each began in 2023 and will complete in 2026) and each has a different focus in its work.

They were also able to share reports as well as time in meeting with the Learning Partner team at NDTi to reflect on their history and BPT journey.

4.1 Case Study – Assemble (National Youth Theatre)

“Watching the development of the young people over a few short months, I can see the impact had by the time they get to spend being playful and creative, and challenging themselves to push the limits of what they thought they were capable of. We've witnessed singers, dancers, poets, and comedians emerging from behind shrouds of shyness and self-doubt: it's a joy and an inspiration.” (Assistant on Assemble (The National Youth Theatre), London)

Background

Assemble builds on the National Youth Theatre's (NYT's) previous work on improving access to theatre, and to careers in the cultural sector, for all young people. The project aims to:

- **build connections** between disabled and non-disabled people and communities
- **instil confidence** in disabled young people to engage with their local area and make use of the resources it contains
- **drive lasting social and policy changes** at the local level, guided by their voices and experiences

Assemble is operating in Manchester, Wales and London. Each area has a local steering group that brings together D/deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent young people, local community organisations, cultural venues, and key local stakeholders. Their role is to bring about local change by sharing learning and improving access.

Assemble is delivered by very diverse local teams, including disabled and neurodiverse practitioners and assistants, as well as volunteer buddies, young people from the local area who act as mentors for the disabled young people.

Creative workshops and cultural visits are the two main elements of the project, drawing on NYT's track record in offering inspiring cultural opportunities to young people.

What has happened?

By Spring 2024, Assemble had engaged 120 young people across the three locations, as well as over 40 volunteers.

All the young people have taken part in **creative workshops** delivered at their non-mainstream schools. The content of the workshops was shaped by the young people themselves, and included art, drama, music and dance. The workshops introduced new and different people (from the delivery team and from other schools) as well as new experiences.

Young people have also enjoyed a range of **cultural experiences**, including trips to the theatre and to galleries, often travelling there on public transport, alongside their volunteer buddies.

What has been the impact?

"I want to thank you all for this. It's really touched my heart, and I like you all very much. It's really made my life better, knowing you all." (Participant)

Assemble has:

- **Built connections through joyful shared experiences**, for example, with new friendships growing between young disabled people and volunteer buddies.
- **Increased self-confidence and a sense of agency among young people**, for example by opening up new possibilities and options, and by encouraging young people to make choices and to use their voice
- **Boosted shared learning and increased expertise** by providing a new platform for practitioners with an interest in inclusion to come together.

What have they learned?

- **Building trust and relationships is a key first step**, by rooting the project in existing networks and community connections.
- **Young disabled people will fly if you give them the opportunity** and a sense of the life chances that are open to them.
- **Not all communities and organisations are ready for disabled young people**, as accessibility of transport, for example, still restricts people's ability to make best use of the opportunities that their community offers.

What next?

"(Assemble) will be an excellent programme to see development over time and yet another opportunity for our young people to explore their independence and creative skills, feel connected with their peers and to access their community and creative opportunities with growing independence." (Staff member, London school)

NYT is reflecting the lessons from Assemble in their own work, as well as helping to improve access to cultural opportunities for young disabled people across the UK and keeping young peoples' voices at the heart of all they do.

Longer version of the above summarised case study is available to view and/or download from [here](#).

4.2 Case study – Rural-Urban Twinning Project (The Real Farming Trust)

“If you want to do something about inclusion and making a difference, do something with another organisation (or person) that you have nothing in common with, you will learn something and something will change.” (Project lead)

Background

The Rural-Urban Twinning Project (Twinning) was designed by the Real Farming Trust (RFT) to enable connections and mutual understanding between people from different walks of life, especially between urban and rural communities. RFT is a social enterprise that supports agroecology, farming that works with nature to produce good food for everyone by fundamental changes across the food and farming system so that it becomes more just and sustainable.

The project includes four sets of twinned organisations in Northern Ireland, Wales, Cornwall and Gloucestershire. The Twins included urban organisations, such as food banks or groups working with migrants or people with learning disabilities, paired with community farms.

Groups of people from each partner in the pair met each other on both sites and collaborated to understand each other's perspectives. They decided what they would like to do together. RFT enabled each pair to access BPT funding to implement their ideas, which must link to a set of impact areas, such as improving connections, bridging divides and helping communities find their voice.

What has happened?

The first six months focused on engaging with potential partners, and building relationships and trust, which was the essential foundation for the project. Once the Twins were in place, the activities and events they decided to take forward included:

- Adults with learning difficulties from NOW in Belfast learnt horticulture skills at Jubilee Farm, some started volunteering on the farm and thinking about possibilities of paid work in the future.
- Asylum seekers from several countries attended the Harvest Festival at Cae Tan Farm near Swansea. A cook from Zanzibar led a cooking session with farm veg in the garden for everyone from both partners in this Twin. People shared stories of cooking on open fires at previous times in their lives.

- A group of Somali families had a lively farm visit and shared Somali lunch in Stroud, cooked with farm vegetables.
- The community farm on the Gower held a cook day as a way of bringing people together to foster relationships in a sociable way with no pressure or structure, but with lots of dancing and circumstantial connecting.
- The community farm in Cornwall & Truro Food Bank enjoyed a tomato themed day with a pizza chef hosted by the farm. People who came shared their stories about tomatoes and had a go at making pizzas and tomato-themed crafts. *'We learned that pizza is a good, accessible vehicle for bringing people together.'*
- Stroud community farm have been holding growing sessions over the last few months in Stroud, which led to families getting involved in growing things over the summer in their own estates in Bristol.

What has been the impact?

"We were worried about our new friends when we saw the riots on the TV in the city. There was nothing going on here in the countryside. But it did suddenly feel relevant because we knew people affected. We really wanted them to know that most people want them to feel safe. We sent cards and cakes."

- **Individual moments for individual people:** it is at the individual or micro level, with people connecting unexpectedly and spontaneously, that some of the first, powerful shifts were visible.
- **Ripple effect of opportunities and activities,** with new connections leading to people volunteering and for some, paid work, as well as a deeper mutual understanding of other communities and cultures.
- **Connection leading to greater sense of safety and belonging, and to mutual support,** for example Twins supported each other practically and emotionally over the summer of 2024, during the riots and violent disturbances which affected many towns and cities.

What have they learned?

- The project relies on a number of essential ingredients:
 - Committed, creative, resilient people
 - Resources and clarity of purpose
 - Time – to build relationships, to learn and to make mistakes
 - Partners who are well embedded in their communities

- **Leave space to see what emerges – and expect the unexpected:** Being community/Twin led means that Twinning continually evolves in response to what people decide is needed, so remaining open, flexible and curious is a key features of this work.
- **Who are you reaching and not reaching?** Many people’s lives are constrained by poverty and hardship, so it is important to find proactive ways of ensuring that as many people as possible have opportunities to participate and to come together.
- **Capacity is always an issue,** both within the Twin organisations, many of which are very small, and also within RFT, as being available to support Twins’ activities takes time.

What next?

Everyone involved in Twinning is keen to keep connecting, hosting more events and co-designing more activities, the nature of which will evolve over time.

The Twinned organisations are starting to develop longer-term projects which they didn’t think of at the beginning. For example, a food bank wants to set up a garden to grow their own veg in their town. One pair wants to set up a vocational apprenticeship for refugees that is based on both horticulture and catering. One group wants to improve access to nature in the city where their community live.

Longer version of the above summarised case study is available to view and/or download from [here](#).

4.3 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 the Onion Collective, a place-based social enterprise, in partnership with design studio, Free Ice Cream, to capture and map the social capital in places, allowing communities to “reveal

the hidden connections that bind them together”. In each place, the Understory team works with an anchor organisation to bring together in a workshop session all those in that area involved in community action - diverse organisations, groups, networks and importantly, individuals. Together they answer ten questions in an online survey, and their responses create a digital network map in real time. The map can be refined and added to later.

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.

What happened?

During the BPT Programme, the Understory project:

- mapped **35 places** including 2 “mega maps” in Dudley (5 maps) and the Scottish Borders (10 maps), resulting in a grand total of 50 maps overall
- 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, including communities of very different scales and with different types of anchor organisations, to maximise the learning.

What has been the impact?

‘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).

- **Greater understanding about the nature of power and community**, such as highlighting the role of the ‘human bridges’ that hold a community together, and the *physical spaces that support these bridges to connect*.

- **Developing insights of participating communities and anchor organisations:** For example, in Frome, the Town Council found that a large number of networks and connections sat with their staff, which they are now seeking to change, by dispersing power more widely.
- **Local understanding about social connections informing local plans and priorities:** All the participating places have used the process and the maps to shape their thinking and strategies, with some seeing it as absolutely central to local working.

What are the key lessons?

- **Piloting and experimenting** throughout has been key for Understory, as they evolved and adapted the tool and their approach to using it.
- **Go at the pace of local people and places**, by thinking carefully about their history, readiness for engagement, and preparing participants for sharing their information and insights openly and safely.
- **Importance of anchor organisations and their capacity:** Understory's anchor organisations varied enormously in terms of their size and capacity, and being able to work collaboratively with them has been central to the ongoing development of the project.
- **Flexible, relationship based funding partners**, TNLCF have been involved and supportive throughout, taking an interest in the ethos as well as progress of the work, adapting their approach when things don't go according to plan, and enabling connections with other BPT projects which has led onto other collaborations and shared learning.

What next?

In the next phase of Understory, the emphasis will be on:

- **Going deeper** in four areas, rather than extending the work to more places, to focus on participating communities' histories as well as their futures, what supports relationships across differences and to provide resources to enable anchor organisations and under-resourced communities to *"turn their attachments and networks into mobilised community action"*.
- **Focusing 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.

Longer version of the above summarised case study is available to view and/or download from [here](#).



5. The epilogue – so what and what next?

5.1 Introduction – about this section

“It’s not the end of the programme, it needs to be the beginning...”

(Project lead, Reflection and learning session)

This report may be the final installment of insights, lessons and reflections from across the BPT Learning Network, but it is not yet the end of the programme. Ten projects are actively delivering into 2025 and 2026, and the learning from BPT is designed to inform future programmes within the Fund and the wider sector. The hope, therefore, is that these ten BPT projects (and others) are able to draw on and embed the lessons shared here, as well as this report serving to distil the legacy and transferable learning that can inform wider developments.

Other BPT projects have secured ongoing funding to continue their work, often in a different way, through a different lens or with a different focus. Understory for example, is developing their digital mapping tool and relationships with four clusters of communities and anchor organisations to explore deeper levels of connection and relational ways of working.

“By working with the stories and histories behind the patterns we see in these maps, we will be able to broaden participation in the community and build greater collective agency, enabling these communities to access their more hopeful dream space, just as we empower our anchor organisations (and anyone working strategically across the community) to gain insights from the maps...”

Having scaled out with BPT, this next phase will be about scaling deep and up as we influence policy via our academic partnerships” (Understory final report)

The remainder of this section shares **five key lessons about sustaining what works, embedding and using the learning** from BPT, at a project, programme and sector wide level.

- 1) Sustaining what works and leaving a legacy.** Many of the BPT projects actively thought (or are thinking) about and designed in ways to ensure sustainability and legacy from the start of their delivery, even though they continually flexed and adapted their work. They also emphasised the importance of leaving a legacy, and crucially, leaving a place better off than they found it.

“When designing our programme, a key focus was on the long-term sustainability of the work, putting things in place that would continue to have impact in those communities after we had stepped away.” (The Essential Mix [Neighbourly Lab] final report)

Being fleet of foot and open to the unexpected were constant topics of discussion at campfire cluster gatherings and reflection and learning events.

Projects also reminded us that shifting power to people and communities (one of the overarching themes for BPT in year 2) is precisely what makes this work sustainable. As one BPT project lead put it: *“lived experiences inform projects whilst they are underway, but one day these are the people who carry on and run the work”*.

A residing message and important skill set for community building and bridging work seems to be to **plan for the long term whilst remaining firmly rooted in the present**

A number of projects also commented on the value of having longer timeframes for their work than is usually funded, which means they can make and learn from mistakes, as well as combining experimentation with more mundane tasks of embedding delivery within local communities and organisations.

- 2) Invest in key people and roles.** We have highlighted in earlier sections of this report, that it is people in a variety of key roles, who bring passion, experience and a range of skills and expertise, who are crucial to success. They not only lift ideas and concepts off the ground and translate these into tangible experiences and opportunities, but they also reach out and engage others (including those not typically involved in such developments), follow up and facilitate connections, and bring different groups together often in unexpected ways and with surprising outcomes.

Investing in these people and their skills and roles as enablers and connectors, particularly at a local level, is crucial for ongoing success and sustaining not just what works but the legacy of bringing people together. Investing in support and networks that nurture, nourish and maintain energy and motivation is also crucial, especially given the tricky contexts and circumstances that projects are operating in around the UK.

“Invest in key people – including those who are gateways who open up opportunities and networks with other gateways. How can we grow more gateways?” (Project lead at a Reflection and Learning Event)

3) The significance of infrastructure and resources that help to build capacity. There have been many conversations with project and programme leads in the second year of our Learning Partner role, about who invests in what and at which level for work that focuses on community engagement, strengthening social connections and relational ways of being and working. It struck us that most if not all projects experienced challenges and difficulties in securing resources from local funders/commissioners, with most relying on national grant funders like TNLCF.

Who, then, is investing in the important business of bringing people together at a local and regional level? Many BPT projects revealed the abundance and richness of natural networks and resources that exist within communities, many of which are invisible or unknown until they are intentionally identified and engaged. So this is not a question of always having to invest in community capacity and/or knowledge; it's about investing in the roles, skills, time and spaces at a local level that help to unearth and harness this abundance.

It would be useful, therefore, to map the current state of play around who is investing in what, because it is clear that the resources, capacity, skills and knowledge leveraged into mapping and enabling local and networked communities to come together through BPT was both welcome and essential.

Other key messages that have come directly from BPT project leads include the following:

- Not everyone has the same ability to come together, so we need to find ways of enabling this in different ways e.g. how time is protected and enabled, and grants to build the capacity of communities to engage

- Community projects need to tap into what is already there i.e. existing assets and strengths. When things are funded as projects the focus of energy and activity can shift, so there is a need to involve communities in shaping the work and ensuring it centres on their priorities, assets and strengths.
- There is definitely an appetite for communities to take control of and direct what happens, and what happens next. There is therefore a need to use some part of project funding to invest in small groups and local organisations to be able to take up roles and keep things going
- ‘Training’ and other kinds of capacity building are important in all of this; don’t assume people know what needs to happen and how without first being shown why, what and how.

4) Programmes and networks matter to projects, creating a sense of shared purpose and collective understanding. It is clear from all of the discussions and feedback from projects over the last two years that they have valued being part of something bigger and beyond their own project. Connecting with other project leads, teams, communities, news, ideas and methods/approaches has been enriching and of practical use. Having opportunities to link up and explore common and very different experiences has been particularly helpful.

In addition to the mechanisms provided through the learning network and support from TNLCF’s Grant Managers, projects also identified that they would have found more time together on an individual or small group basis useful. One project lead suggested that future programmes could consider factoring in other mechanisms, such as project buddies or mentoring arrangements. Building in time systematically to “download” project leads and teams as their project finishes would have also helped TNLCF to generate and capture additional learning.

At the end of the final Reflection and Learning session, BPT participants were asked to share their final, closing messages to each other, and others involved in similar developments and initiatives. Some of these messages are shared below:

“It’s been great to connect and see how we’re all doing such different things but working towards the same goals.”

“You have been inspiring. Keep it up, and recognise the real strengths of what you are doing, even amidst our constant reflection of how we are doing, how we could do better.”

“It’s been a great support network to have everyone together.”

Design in ways of exploring, tracking and understanding impact from the start, remembering that this is not the same thing as investing in external evaluations which may take up resources and focus the learning elsewhere when projects finish.

Potential to focus more on stories and creative methods for qualitative approaches that capture journeys and harness the energy of BPT projects.

Stories work at an individual, project, community, and wider system level and connect with the innovative aspects as well as reflecting the deep concern for people and places across the UK.

Think of evaluation activities as ways of capturing and sharing learning to inform the future rather than assessing performance, monitoring activities or just evaluating impact on its own.



Appendix 1. Bringing People Together projects

	Project name	Organisation	Project summary	Start date	Finish date
1.	Essential Mix	Neighbourly Lab (The Lab)	This was a pilot project exploring and testing the Neighbourly Lab theory that minor changes to encounters between essential workers and community members could be more humanised.	01/09/2021	01/03/2023
2.	Building Capacity to imagine and shape futures of connection, hope and possibility	New Constellations	New Constellations sought funding to create journey experiences that help communities envision and shape their futures. They have developed a process that brings people together to craft new stories for their community's future.	01/10/2021	12/04/2024
3.	Design Differently	Design Council	The vision for this work was a thriving network of community designers across the UK, made up of community members and council staff using design skills as a way of coming together to tackle the climate crisis and bringing in expert designers from their local area to help them turn their ideas into reality.	01/12/2021	01/04/2023
4.	Understory	Onion Collective	Understory was a participatory and sophisticated digital mapping tool designed to illustrate and reflect the hidden and unacknowledged connections, and interdependencies across place-based communities.	21/12/2021	21/12/2023
5.	The Together Campaign	The Together Coalition	The Together Campaign was focused on building kinder, closer and more connected communities to mirror a shift in public attitudes as the nation was recovering from Covid-19.	01/01/2022	01/01/2023

6.	Communities Co-creating Sustainable Tourism	Social Enterprise Academy	This project aimed to bring together twenty rural communities across Wales and Scotland, all facing challenges in mitigating the negative impacts of tourism on their communities.	10/01/2022	10/07/2023
7.	Together We Are (TWA)	Groundswell Project	TWA aimed to build community resilience to protect against the social isolation that can leave people/groups vulnerable to harmful influences.	10/01/2022	10/01/2024
8.	Tough Options Moving Forward	The Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine in partnership with Corrymeela (NI)	This project brought together two groups of 35 young people each, one from Manchester (focusing on Israeli/Palestine conflict) and another in Northern Ireland (focusing on the NI troubles) to examine issues of conflict, conflict resolution and management within their communities.	01/02/2022	01/09/2025
9.	The Roots Programme - Cultural Exchange	The Roots Programme	Roots “Cultural Exchange” programme connected participants in unlikely partnerships that bridge gaps in terms of ethnicity, location, age, gender and roles that have a community, regional or national focus.	10/03/2022	10/03/2024
10.	Good Grief Connects (GGC)	University of Bristol	GGC aimed to bring about a seismic shift in society’s attitude towards grief, death and dying, through the development of compassionate, connected communities equipped to nurture people through loss, both personal and collective.	28/03/2022	28/03/2024
11.	Give a Day (GAD)	Ratio	GAD was an annual opportunity for individuals, groups and local businesses to work together on common projects identified by them and developed and implemented with the aim of improving where they live.	01/05/2022	01/05/2023
12.	Connecting Hearts, Connecting Minds, Connecting Community	Plan for Peace	This project sought to bring people together through the creation of a locally-led, community infrastructure for cohesion within and across UK communities to address the fracture and division of current times	01/07/2022	01/01/2024

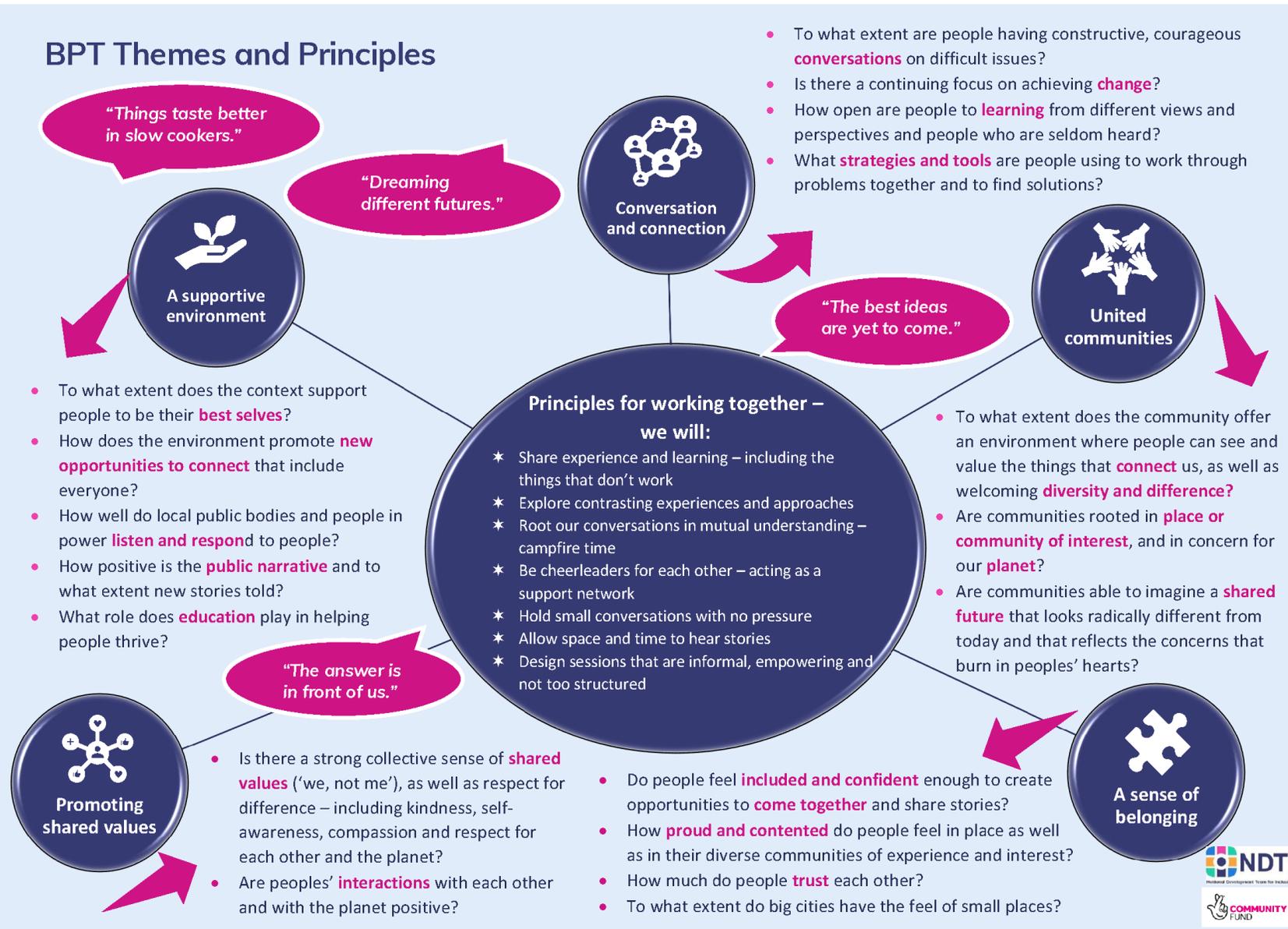
13.	Trees for Climate Action (TfCA)	Trees for Cities	TfCA sought to bring young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds together with older people who are more engaged in community activity. The project used the Queen's Platinum Jubilee as an opportunity to bridge community divides.	01/10/2022	01/10/2025
14.	Assemble	The National Youth Theatre of Great Britain (NYT)	NYT has worked in partnership with National Youth Arts Wales ² and Gig Buddies ³ to develop Local Inclusivity Networks that enable young learning disabled and/or neurodiverse people to be actively involved in their communities and, simultaneously, for young non-disabled people to socialise with and better understand their disabled peers.	12/03/2023	12/03/2026
15.	Rural/Urban Twinning Project	The Real Farming Trust	This project's aim has been to bring together 8 urban and rural organisations and participants with lived experience to create four twinning partnerships to support communities experiencing disadvantages such as food insecurity, racial inequalities, disability and those supporting refugees and asylum seekers.	01/04/2023	01/10/2026
16.	Creating Intergenerational Communities	Generations Working Together	Creating Intergenerational Communities has been a partnership project between Generations Working Together, Linking Generations NI and Apples and Honey Nightingale Nursery, with delivery of 30 pilot projects across England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (NI).	03/04/2023	03/10/2025
17.	Big Help Out & Coronation Champions (BHOCC)	The Royal Voluntary Service	Launched to mark the Coronation, BHOCC aimed to boost nationwide volunteering by offering accessible opportunities from various organisations. Partnering with the Royal Household, they wanted to engage key media and corporate partners to reach new and diverse audiences.	24/04/2023	24/12/2023
18.	Unlocking New Social Opportunities in Shops	Neighbourly Lab	The project's vision has been to create local opportunities for community support and interaction, reducing barriers and normalising the need for both. They aimed to achieve	01/07/2023	01/07/2025

			this through shops and supermarkets, leveraging their unique ability to bring communities together and serve as outreach points.		
19.	Infrastructure for Relationship-Centred Practice (RCP)	Shift Foundation (The Relationship Project)	The aim of this project was to conduct two pilots in the first year and three in the second year to enhance the use of RCP. These pilots, scoped by the Collective and delivered by the Relationship project team, would explore how to best measure RCP's impact in workplaces or communities.	01/08/2023	01/08/2026
20.	More in Common Partnerships (MICP)	The Jo Cox Foundation	More in Common Partnerships aim has been to expand their MICP model across England and Wales by developing 15 new partnerships and integrating them into the MIC Network2. MICP's are independent entities focused on fostering community, mutual understanding, and respect, promoting a sense of belonging for everyone.	01/09/2023	01/09/2026
21.	Steps to Togetherness	Civil Society Consulting CIC	The aim of this project has been to unite people, communities and civil society organisations in England and Scotland, with the aim of complementing and expanding good practice in the development of inter-faith dialogue to improve social connection, community cohesion and understanding of difference.	01/09/2023	01/09/2025
22.	Pride Groups, LGBT+ and ally clubs in schools (Pride Groups)	Just Like Us	This project aimed to expand the successful Just Like Us (JLU) Pride Groups in schools across England and Wales. The funding supports scaling up the programme, testing new approaches to enhance allyships, and developing the JLU Pride Group of the Year Awards to recognise schools championing LGBT+ inclusion.	01/09/2023	01/09/2026
23.	The Interfaith Restorative Justice Project	Faith and Belief Forum	The Interfaith Restorative Justice project, a collaboration between Faith & Belief Forum, Why Me?, and Interfaith Glasgow, aimed to foster understanding, trust, and conflict resolution through restorative practices like restorative circles.	01/11/2023	01/11/2026



Appendix 2. BPT Learning Framework (see page 11)

BPT Themes and Principles





National Development Team for Inclusion

www.ndti.org.uk