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# MAKING PARTNERSHIPS WORK



Partnerships at the heart of  
Access to Nature projects



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## Partnerships at the heart of Access to Nature projects

### ABOUT THIS PAPER

Welcome to this paper, one in the second series of Early Findings papers. **Here we focus our learning on the role partnerships can play in Access to Nature projects.** It is based on the findings from projects about their partnerships and how this has impacted on their work; it includes their experiences of what has worked and what has not worked for them, as identified through the Access to Nature self evaluation process. This is distilled into a number of key learning points about partnership working.

These papers are being produced across the lifetime of Access to Nature and demonstrate what is being learnt about encouraging people who have little or no experience of the natural environment to go out into the outdoors. This includes messages to inform the continuing work of Access to Nature projects and the work of other organisations interested in or committed to this kind of work. More Findings Papers will be produced as Access to Nature progresses and as we build on our learning to date.

### THE CURRENT CONTEXT

The current political agenda parallels the goals of many of the Access to Nature projects. The vision for a Big Society focuses on a belief that people should be empowered to improve their communities and shape the services they receive. The three core strands of the current Localism agenda – promoting social action in communities; empowering communities; and opening up public services – all reflect the kinds of ambitions of many of the funded projects. Within Natural England, the commitments to reconnect people with nature; protect natural assets; and maximise the opportunities offered by a greener economy are all priorities that underpin and complement Access to Nature.



## WHY PARTNERSHIP?

It was always the intention that partnerships would be at the heart of Access to Nature projects. This made sense given the unique nature of the programme, linking two specialist areas of expertise with a limited track record of collaboration – engaging hard to reach groups and accessing the natural environment. Partnership was the most logical way of making sure that every project had the relevant skills, knowledge and experience it would need.

Partnership offered the chance to bring together different but complementary skills; help organisations reach new audiences; and increase projects' capacity and reach. Partnership between organisations also provides the space in which new ideas can emerge and innovation can flourish... sometimes leading to unexpected outcomes.

This paper shows what partnership has looked like in practice for some Access to Nature projects and helps us to understand what makes an effective partnership as well as where there have been challenges. The evidence highlights how partnerships can be a powerful force and when, at their best, they provide an opportunity for innovative, inclusive, effective and efficient collaboration.

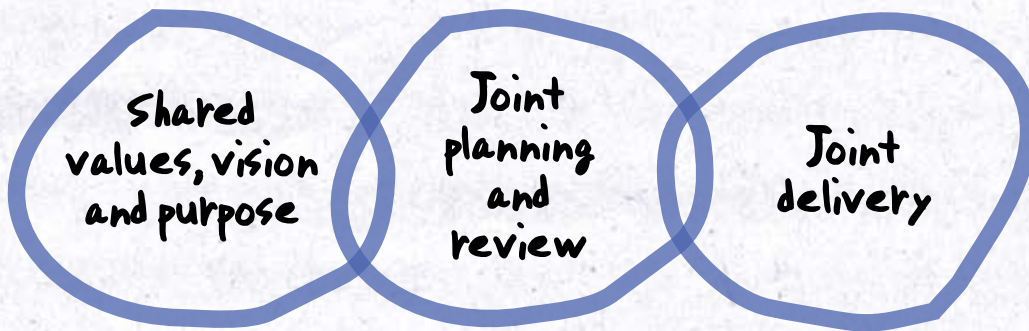


## ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS

Arguably, not all Access to Nature projects are strictly partnerships. For example, some have used the term to describe the organisations they have come into contact with through their work, and others have used it to for referral agencies or match funders.

In fact, a partnership is a very specific form of collaborative working. Where genuine partnerships have been at the heart of Access to Nature projects, some have been at the strategic level, while others were operational in their focus. Whichever is the case, **partnerships are about organisations working together in a mutually beneficial relationship**. A partnership is an agreement that will benefit all involved and should add value to each organisation; the sum is greater than the parts<sup>1</sup>.

Typically, partnerships have three key features for their collaborative work<sup>2</sup>:



### Shared values, vision and purpose

"From day one there was the expectation that partners would work together. All partners shared the aspirations and vision."

Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project

Where partnerships have a clear and shared sense of purpose, where they share common values and principles, these features are evident in everything that is done. When everyone pulls in the same direction, the project works towards the same goals and there is a clear intent about what can be achieved. It is visible in the way the work is delivered on the ground and how it is communicated to the people that the project works with. The essence of partnership should shape everything that the project does. When this is not the case, partnership working becomes an energy sapping process that can create conflict, lack of clarity and 'mission drift'.

**Key learning:** partnership members need to 'own' and embody the values and purpose of the partnership so the decision making processes and implementation are effective and easily understood. This is an ongoing process and requires good relationship building, skills and diplomacy to ensure the partnership remains relevant, engaged and energised.

"A very good sense of a shared mission has developed, working towards what the project set out to do."

Let Nature Feed Your Senses



## Joint planning and review

*“The Steering Group, which has all partners represented, has proven to be an excellent way to share reports, discuss budgets and tie the project into the wider ‘community cohesion’ and ‘environment and conservation’ agendas.”*

Wild Places

Joint planning and review involves partners agreeing work plans together and monitoring their progress. This can be at a strategic level or focused on operational matters or they can run in parallel, but problems arise when the two functions are combined in one place. Some Access to Nature projects have experienced the confusion and lack of direction this causes and have had to invest in re-configuring the partnership or abandon it altogether as a result. This also illustrates how partnership working requires investment; the effectiveness of partnerships is not accidental and needs both the time and energy of members.

**For example:** The Wild Places project has benefited from having a long-standing partnership at its core. Further relationships were developed with the Friends of Whittington Park and Islington Council’s Ecology Centre, both contributing to the planning and piloting of project ideas. This collaboration was particularly useful as it married together expertise in community development with the specialist know how of the team at the Ecology Centre.

**Key learning:** the effectiveness of partnerships is not accidental; they require clarity of function and purpose and an investment of resources if they are to add real value to a project.

*“The opportunity for the two organisations to have sufficient time to work together in one location and discuss issues at length overcomes most of the challenges associated with working in partnership in locations several hundred miles apart.”*

Let Nature Feed Your Senses



## Joint project delivery

**“Partners have a very ‘hands on’ involvement with the project.”**

Hastings Wild Things

Good partnerships should avoid duplication or fragmentation. They build on what the members are already doing and / or their areas of expertise; having the right people at the right time and doing the right things together is what projects should be striving for. Joint delivery adds value by utilising the strengths of the partnership members and emphasising the unique contribution each partner brings to the project.

**For example:** Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project has benefited enormously from the support partners have been able to give, particularly at events and activities. In addition to Natural England’s resources, the project also secured funding from the Joint Public Health Unit’s Change for Life Three Areas Project. As a result the project has delivered work jointly with other initiatives that received this funding, benefiting all parties.

**Key learning:** the success of the partnership will be directly and profoundly affected by its ability to elicit, harness and focus the intellectual capital and goodwill that is resident in its members.

**“Everyone around this table has helped in some shape or form and I couldn’t have got on as quickly as I have done without them.”**

Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project



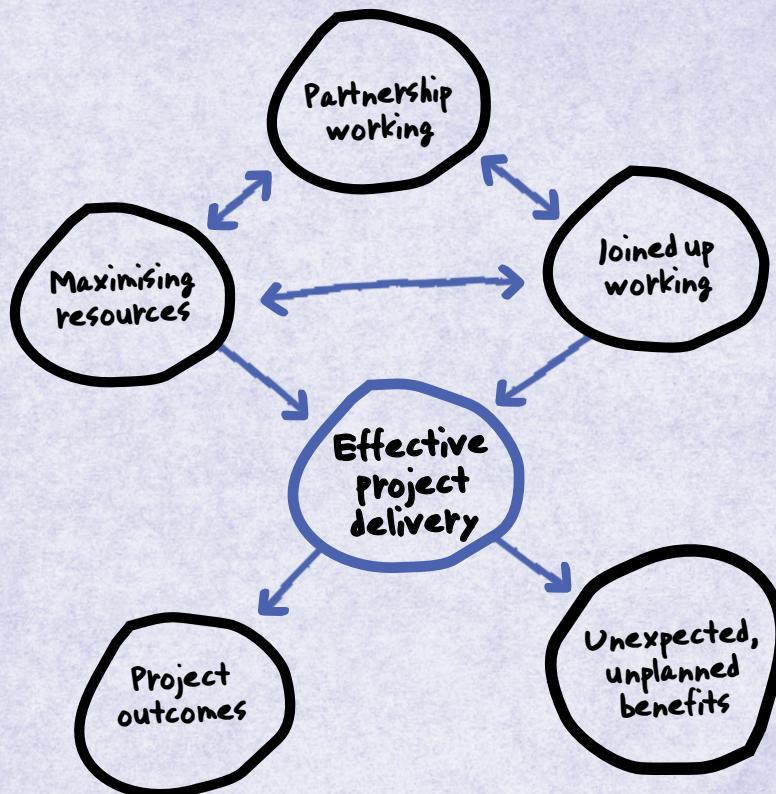
## THE BENEFITS OF PARTNERSHIP WORKING

"The range of partners within our Steering Group has really added to the breadth and depth of the project."

Stepping Stones to Nature

The ultimate goal for partnership working in Access to Nature is to deliver an effective project on the ground that fulfils its original purpose and outcomes, and reflects its underpinning values and principles around engaging hard to reach groups in the natural environment.

Drawing on the experience of the five Access to Nature projects referenced in this paper, we have identified the catalytic relationship between two aspects of partnership working that make a significant contribution to effective project delivery; they are joined up working and maximising resources.



## Joined up working

“(The project has) identified the right partners to work with. The partners were identified because they were working with the young people and adults Hastings Wild Things is trying to target... There is a good understanding of each other’s roles and a recognition of the benefits of working closely together.”

Hastings Wild Things

A joined up approach is one that makes the most of the relative strengths of the various project partners.

For example: Stepping Stones to Nature partners say that they value the utilisation of their time, skills and resources to work collaboratively with SS2N. They say:

“SS2N has managed to engage with the groups we have been trying to reach for years and is actively supporting the work we are doing. To align working, add value, supporting each other- in terms of visibility in the neighbourhood and of sharing resources - e.g. we can promote SS2N activities whilst we are in playgrounds encouraging local residents to raise issues for neighbourhood meetings. We are able to promote SS2N as a way of engaging with local residents.”

Plymouth City Council Neighbourhood Regeneration Team

“The SS2N partnership has enabled us to deliver a project which introduces men to Dartmoor National Park. The activities have had a profound impact on participants and opened our eyes to the possibilities of using the moors to deliver health projects.”

Plymouth Public Health Development Unit

“The City Centre Company has been keen to work with SS2N... activities like their nature trail and Love Parks Weeks not only provide opportunities for people to discover Plymouth but also increase dwell time in the city centre which is positive for local businesses too.”

City Centre Company



## Maximising resources

**“Working together delivers a better service.”**

Stepping Stones to Nature

**“Partners bring additional resources.”**

Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project

Projects are demonstrating how a strong partnership is one that can draw in resources from its partnership members. There are mutual benefits, particularly where the partnership also help deliver the organisational objectives and targets of those organisations involved.

**“Partners are benefiting because it contributes to their own targets.”**

Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project

**For example:** Fryston Woods partners have not only given their time and expertise to the project but have also brought physical resources, such as tree planting equipment and willow from the local authority, to play equipment, gazebos and transport from the Primary Care Trust.



## THE OUTCOMES OF PARTNERSHIP WORKING

“A number of our official partners have contributed a huge amount of time, energy and passion in delivering the aims of the project.”

Stepping Stones to Nature

Access to Nature projects have shown how partnership working contributes to the progress they have made towards achieving their outcomes. One of the great benefits of partnership working is that it creates new collaborations that in turn generate new ideas and opportunities for joint working. There are often surprising, unexpected and unplanned outcomes of partnerships.

- **New ventures:** the Fryston Woods partners are now working on a project to develop a new heritage centre in the area and their track record in joint working has influenced the decisions to support the building.
- **More joint working:** a number of organisations involved in Stepping Stones to Nature have independently started to organise activities and events together.
- **Greater influence:** the Wild Places partnership has been invited to sit on the panel delivering Islington’s Biodiversity Action Plan.
- **Increased connections:** Wild Places have made new connections with the brand new Ward Partnerships in Islington, helping to develop links with a number of Borough Councillors.
- **Demonstrating good practice:** having worked in the area for some time, the Primary Care Trust was initially sceptical about Fryston Woods’ ability to engage with the local community. However, their success in attracting high numbers to events has shown what can be achieved and has encouraged the PCT to be more positive about their own work in the area.



## THE CHALLENGES OF PARTNERSHIP WORKING

*“The main delivery partner was under threat due to the cuts and therefore unable to commit to the project.”*

Wild Places

The main challenge Access to Nature project partnerships have faced have been as a result of the economic climate and the resulting contraction of the voluntary and public sectors. Some key organisations have had to consolidate their activities and withdraw from new work; others have experienced significant periods of re-structuring and re-adjustment. As a result projects have had to be ‘fleet of foot’, exploring new opportunities for partnership and focusing on those organisations that could contribute effectively in the ways that the project needed.



*“The main concern has been the loss locally of key partner organisations. In addition there has been considerable re-structuring of local government services for young people .... Some of this has meant the end of certain streams of work, and some to considerable delays in events taking place.”*

Wild Things

## IN SUMMARY

We are learning from Access to Nature projects how partnerships can be a powerful force that offer more than just the sum of the individual organisations working together. They are a practical and effective way of solving problems, maximising resources and co-ordinating delivery on the ground. In the case of Access to Nature they have also been a vehicle for the cross fertilisation of specialisms, empowering people, systems and organisations to learn and change for the better.

Project Fact File

**Name** Let Nature Feed Your Senses

**Lead** Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) and Sensory Trust

**Overview** Providing sensory rich encounters with nature, food and farming on a network of hosts sites comprising farms, nature reserves, city farms and care farms across England.

**Website** <http://www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org/letnature/home.eb>

Project Fact File

**Name** Hastings Wild Things

**Lead** RSPCA Mallydams Wood

**Overview** Enabling young people and teenage parents to engage in woodland and wildlife activities, promoting enjoyment and understanding of nature.

**Website** <http://www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/wildlife/centres/mallydams>

Project Fact File

**Name** Wild Places

**Lead** Octopus community Network (a network of community centres), Islington, London

**Overview** Engaging those with limited access to or are excluded from natural spaces and the outdoors by providing a seasonal programme of activities, experiential learning opportunities and community based biodiversity activities.

**Website** <http://www.octopuscommunities.org.uk>

Project Fact File

**Name** Fryston Woods Access and Improvement Project

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**Lead** Castleford Heritage Trust

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**Overview** The project is seeking to increase awareness and usage amongst the communities of Airedale and Ferry Fryston of the woodland that exist in the area.

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**Website** <http://www.castlefordheritagetrust.org.uk>

Project Fact File

**Name** Stepping Stones to Nature

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**Lead** Plymouth City Council

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**Overview** Promoting access to green spaces and the health and well being benefits, and building links between green space and health professionals.

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**Website** <http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/steppingstones>



## ABOUT ACCESS TO NATURE

Access to Nature is a scheme run by Natural England and funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Natural England works on behalf of a consortium of eleven other major environmental organisations and distributes £28.75 million Lottery funding under the scheme, which has been developed to encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly those with little or no previous contact with the natural environment.

Funded projects range from local community based schemes through to national initiatives from large organisations. Diversity in scale is mirrored by a diversity and richness of projects, from equipment to allow people with disabilities to access the natural environment; supporting disadvantaged groups and those who ordinarily face barriers to visiting the countryside; as well as many projects which are providing a range of volunteering and educational opportunities for local communities and young people.

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## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Frank, F. and Smith, A., 2000. *The Partnership Handbook*. Canada: Labour Market Learning and Development Unit, Human Resources Development Canada.
- 2 Groups for Growth, 2005. *Make Partnerships Work*. Huddersfield: Huddersfield Pride Ltd.

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## ALTERNATIVE FORMATS

Our documents are available as pdf downloads from our website, suitable for text reader technology. We may be able to provide other formats (e.g. Braille, a minority language, or large print) for special documents where there is a proven communication need.

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## PHOTO CREDITS

The pictures used in this publication have been kindly provided by Let Nature Feed Your Senses.