

# Connected Communities: Learning from Collaborative Place-Based Working

## **Introduction**

Over the last three years Sported has been working in numerous communities trialling place-based and thematic approaches to supporting community groups and clubs. Our Connected Communities model aims to bring people together to collectively help identify barriers and challenges facing young people in their local area and to deliver solutions to these issues through collaborative, sustainable, and community-led cluster groups.

As part of Connected Communities, Sported conducted a learning programme to better understand what worked well and not so well in developing and delivering this collaborative place-based model of working. We wanted learning to play an active and iterative role in shaping our Connected Communities model, making sure that lessons from each location could help other Connected Communities projects as they developed. We also wanted to share learning from our Connected Communities programme to support others interested in place-based models of working, whether in the sport for development sector or more widely.

This review is the product of our learning programme for Sported's Connected Communities projects. It provides an overview of the key lessons we took from this collaborative place-based model of working that we have supported over the past four years and explores the important steps in developing this kind of model of working. It also reflects on how these lessons have shaped the broader place-based working model that Sported has developed in this time.

The review is based on a series of semi-structured interviews that were conducted at regular intervals with Sported staff involved in each Connected Communities location: Hartlepool, the Isle of Wight, Rhyl, and, for London, Lewisham & Greenwich, Waltham Forest, Ealing & West London, Haringey, and Lambeth & Southwark. We're grateful for the support of all those Sported staff involved in these locations who contributed to this learning review.

## **Key learnings**

### **Flexibility and balance**

Being flexible over intended outcomes, ways of working, and the extent of partner involvement is important. These elements of collaborative place-based working can change over time because of the context of each location and the different capacities of community groups and stakeholders involved.

### **Taking time**

Place-based collaborative work takes time: time to build trust with those already working within communities, time to build collaborative ways of working, and time to deliver the intended change with local communities. It's important not to underestimate this and helpful to be realistic when setting out timescales.

### **Capacity-building**

While community groups are often keen to build connections and deliver shared outcomes for their local area, not every group is confident or experienced in collaborative cluster-based working. Building collective capacity through developing skills and knowledge in this way of working can be an important step to empower groups to deliver sustainable methods of working best suited for their local area.

### **Resourcing**

It's important to have dedicated staff time to support this model of working and this should be a key factor in resource-planning at the start of a project. Co-ordinating roles are integral to supporting collaborative work and making sure to allocate time for this kind of work, or to recruit someone for this specific role, should ideally be part of place-based work.

### **Relationship mapping**

Mapping out existing relationships at the start of and throughout place-based working can be a huge help. It builds a vital picture of key engagement opportunities and provides a helpful resource for evaluation and reflection on looking back on how relationships have developed over time through this model of working.

### **Evaluation and learning**

Participatory learning and community reporting models are well-suited to place-based programmes and empower groups to be the leading voice in reflecting on outcomes and telling their stories. Embracing evaluation that explores less tangible but vital outcomes around community connections works just as well, if not better than, more traditional measures of success.

## **Starting off: understanding and identifying locations for place-based work**

Choosing a location for place-based working is the critical starting point for a successful approach. There are several factors that can help shape this decision. Sported found the following helped to identify the most relevant and feasible places within which to reach out and engage local groups and stakeholders:

- What did existing data tell us about an area? Publicly accessible data was useful in revealing the context for geographic locations as well as potential challenges or strengths within these communities. We used a variety of such data, including the UK's Indices of Multiple Deprivation classification and local activity data for current community engagement to map out the socio-economic context for each location. This was generally done at the Lower Super Output Area level to best utilise small-area statistics, though in London we focused on borough-level data. On reflection, ward-based geographies in London would have worked better because borough-sized analysis encountered too many variables and other activities.
- What was Sported's capacity to support place-based working in an area? Our place-based model aims to empower local groups to develop sustainable, collaborative approaches that they collectively own within their community. We recognised, however, that Sported support would be required – at the very least in the initial stages of our place-based programmes. With this in mind, we reflected on what our capacity was in those areas so that we could make sure we selected locations where we had the resources to support at an in-person level. This included how close our field team were to potential locations, the number of Sported volunteer consultants within an area, and the time required to deliver the first steps of the programme in connecting groups together.
- What relationships did Sported currently have within an area? Our Connected Communities programme was a collaborative approach and we wanted to make sure that where possible we were able to draw upon our existing experience in a potential location, including where we already had trusted relationships with local groups and stakeholders. In conversations across Sported we identified the extent of our existing relationships with local stakeholders in potential locations, which

allowed us to establish if particular places might benefit from our existing connections there.

- Were there existing place-based programmes delivering in the area? As we noted above, place-based working at its most effective brings together all those interested in delivering for particular areas – and this includes other programmes in such areas already empowering local groups and stakeholders. Sported looked for where programmes aimed at collaborative delivery were already in place and assessed whether it was possible to support these existing networks through our own involvement in that location. In the longer-term, we found that working with programmes that have already built trusted relationships, collaborative working patterns, and networks of interest in a location had the potential to help with challenges around limited staff capacity.

It can be helpful to think of these factors as falling into two different approaches to understanding potential locations:

1. Asset-based: factors that demonstrate the existing strengths and capabilities of a community, helping to identify existing capacity and what is already working well and supporting a model that empowers these existing foundations.
2. Cold-spot: factors that may reveal ways in which a community is currently underserved or where capacity is limited, supporting place-based programmes that deliver resourcing in these areas.

By asking these questions of potential locations for the Connected Communities programme Sported was able to identify locations most feasible for this model of working. Importantly, it also acted as a springboard for engaging stakeholders in these areas and shaped initial conversations around how the programme in each location could develop to best suit its particular context.

## **Beginning to work with communities: connecting groups and capacity-building**

### **Connecting with local communities**

Once locations were selected, the Sported team started by engaging local stakeholders through existing relationships within these communities. This included connecting with those with whom we already had a trusted relationship but also those new to Sported but who had their own long-standing and trusted presence in their community.

This was for two main reasons:

1. On a practical level, with limited capacity on both Sported and local stakeholders' sides, building on these existing relationships made it quicker to connect with interested parties in the target communities. It also swiftly harnessed local knowledge of other groups in the area who might have the interest and capacity to play a supporting role setting-up the cluster groups.
2. Trust is critical for successful place-based working and engaging with communities through existing relationships helped demonstrate that Sported was a trusted partner for those already working in the area. Community groups can, rightly, be wary of programmes parachuting into their area with a focus on short-term gains for external stakeholders – and in some Connected Communities locations we found there was initial scepticism over the project. By building on relationships that already existed in these communities we demonstrated to those who hadn't previously connected with Sported that we were already known and trusted by other local organisations working in the area.

We found that identifying an 'anchor' group or individual – already based in and trusted by the local community – was a helpful initial step because they could help build relationships, increase trust, and support around the practicalities of meeting with the local community.

In-person visits to local groups also built trust. These visits introduced Sported team members to potential cluster group partners, increased familiarity between those interested in the programmes, and helped the Sported team better understand local needs, challenges, and opportunities. Though it takes time to conduct these visits, in-person conversations helped build confidence in the Connected Communities programme. Sported staff recommended them as an important early investment of resources.

## **Bringing groups together**

The next step after these initial connections were made was to bring local stakeholders together as cluster groups to discuss community-wide challenges, identify a single issue to focus on, and to establish the best way of collective working.

We found that engaging participants consistently in the early stages of these cluster groups took time, particularly as the immediate benefits to joining together on Connected Communities weren't always as tangible as other programmes (for example, funding bids). Given groups were already delivering positive results for their local communities and the fact many were already working at full capacity, how could we best articulate a vision for creating further positive outcomes for local areas through a long-term, collaborative place-based programme?

We found that the following helped – or could help – in responding to this early challenge:

- Hosting in-person workshops that brought local stakeholders together to encourage discussion, collaboration, and an immediate sense of collective working.
- Starting small, by focusing on short- to mid-term outcomes that were more feasible and tangible than long-term goals.
- Incentivising engagement through non-monetary support for cluster group members, such as professional development resources for group leaders or broader capacity-building opportunities for their group.
- Small-scale seed-funding or micro-grants aimed at start-up/pilot activities that draw interested parties in and build momentum for delivery.
- Recognising that the interest, experience, and capacity of those interested in the cluster groups was a critical factor, and it's important to be flexible about who joins and the extent of their engagement.

It also helped being flexible in supporting their choice of local issue to focus on. Rather than pressing Sported's vision or preference, we encouraged groups to arrive at a consensus between themselves. This emphasised a core element of the Connected Communities model: that it was designed to empower groups to work toward outcomes best suited to their communities rather than having external outcomes imposed on them. Some degree of 'scaffolding' can be helpful for this stage – such as providing data to explore local challenges or opportunities – but giving groups the space to choose their own outcomes built trust in the Connected Communities approach.

## Collective capacity-building

During the Covid-19 pandemic there was great interest among Sported members for connecting with other community groups to collaborate on solutions that meet the needs of their local area. This was a big reason why we created our Connected Communities programme.

However, as the various locations started off on their Connected Communities journey, we found that there was sometimes a difference between this level of interest and the collective capacity of the Connected Communities cluster groups around collaborative place-based working. Groups didn't always have experience of working in this kind of cluster-based approach and perhaps had less confidence in driving the cluster groups themselves, independent of Sported in the long-term.

At the same time, with the return of in-person delivery after the pandemic there was understandably a greater focus on groups returning their focus to their individual activities. This meant that the collective capacity for the collaborative cluster groups shifted over time. In many cases the work of the cluster groups tended to fall on a smaller number of individuals who had the time or experience to continue engaging with the work on a consistent basis, with other groups engaging as and when need emerged or capacity allowed.

From this experience we learned that building groups' capacity around collaborative working would have been a valuable step in the Connected Communities programme. This could be achieved through a combination of two approaches. Firstly, capacity-building around skills and knowledge in ways of working in cluster groups could increase groups' confidence as a collective and encourage a greater sharing of the responsibilities within the cluster groups. Examples of this include:

- **How do prioritise** as a cluster group?
- How do you make decisions in a group format?
- How do you approach conflict as a collective?
- How do you engage with local stakeholders, such as political and statutory actors?
- How can you collectively measure success?

Secondly, recruiting specific co-ordinator roles or providing funding to free up more time for existing stakeholders to support running the cluster groups would have helped build the collective capacity of the groups. As the Connected Communities projects developed, one of the key requests from groups involved was for a co-ordinator role that supported the work of the collective. Ideally this individual would:

- Be based in the local community.
- Have existing experience of community engagement.
- Focus on administrative support for the work.
- Engage cluster group members on a regular basis.
- Continuing to build the network of stakeholders engaged in the programme.

The role would take pressure off existing members of the cluster groups and, from a Spotted perspective, encourage the longer-term sustainability of the clusters by transferring administrative responsibility from our team to a project-specific individual.

## **Working and learning as collectives**

### **The role of funding**

The role of funding was a critical issue throughout the course of the Connected Communities projects. Through not the focal point of the Connected Communities model of working, we recognised early on that funding could play an important role in helping the cluster groups build capacity and deliver activities in pursuit of their local goals. In considering the role of funding, we learned that:

- Funding at the start of the project can be useful to incentivise engagement from stakeholders, perhaps through delivery of small pilot or start-up activities.
- Funding to enable critical support roles, such as the previously mentioned co-ordinator roles, can build collective capacity.
- Working on collaborative funding bids or administering a funding pot as a collective cluster were effective ways of bringing groups together and building close working relationships.
- Too much focus on funding can distract from the broader goals of supporting sustainable collective action through the cluster groups.

In the end, it was up to each individual cluster group within a place-based collective model of working to decide how much emphasis should be put on funding as an outcome or mechanism for change in their area.

### **Embracing flexibility**

As the programmes developed in each location, we found that change was a constant. Groups' capacity often fluctuated and individuals' involvement shifted over time. The outcomes identified at the start of the project shifted as groups engaged with one another or where resources meant the focus had to move elsewhere. Some external stakeholders took much longer to engage with than expected which pushed timelines for activities.

Reflecting on this, we found that the place-based collective working model works best when accepting a high degree of flexibility right from the start. It's important to build this into the project plan to begin with. There was a sense from across all the clusters that the initial project plans were too prescriptive and rigid. It's better to engage flexibly with the groups over the course of the projects and allow their interactions and the issues raised to guide both the outcomes of the work but also how this is achieved.



## **Taking time**

Accepting from the start that this kind of community action takes time is vital. Place-based work should be viewed as long-term action that can vary in pace over the course of the programme. Building in sufficient time to connect groups together, develop sufficient levels of trust with and between project groups, build capacity to work together, and allow networks to develop is critical to a successful programme. It can take up to a year simply to build trust and working relationships between groups, especially where they are new to each other and may not have experience of collaborative working. Understanding the outcomes from the programme takes even longer.

It was widely acknowledged by all involved in the Connected Communities programme that a constant across each location was things took longer than originally planned. A key learning was that project planning should be flexible to deal with this and that patience is critical.

## **Evaluation and learning**

Evaluating place-based working is challenging. We found that mapping evaluations and learning onto the original project planning and outcomes frameworks was not always possible because of the changing nature of the Connected Communities work. Intended outcomes from the first months of the projects weren't the same as those that emerged as the work developed, and stakeholders involved in the early months weren't always available for reflection at later stages owing to capacity issues and changing priorities.

At the same time, our Connected Communities programme emphasised networking and partnership-building, rather than the more tangible, quantitative-based outcomes that funders look to as more traditional measures of success.

However, in engaging with these challenges, we learned that the Connected Communities-style of working actually opens up different opportunities for learning and evaluation. This includes more participatory and community-based reporting that empowers groups to be more prominent in the learning process and embracing the benefits of highlighting less tangible but just as meaningful outcomes, especially around network building.

In the end, we found that a mixed approach to evaluation and learning, combining more traditional approaches with participatory methods, struck a useful balance. Across the different cluster groups we used a combination of the following methods:

### Post-programme online survey

- A more traditional approach to evaluation and learning, employing a mixed quantitative and qualitative online survey sent to all groups who engaged with the cluster groups during the course of the programme.

- Less resource-intensive than participatory methods but proved difficult to engage all groups with the survey and the question formats limit opportunities to fully explore community-wide change and the reasons for this.
- We found surveys were best employed as a supporting evaluation and learning tool rather than as a primary (or sole) method.

#### Ripple effect mapping (REM)

- Participatory approach that brings group leaders together to map out the changes that have occurred and the connections between such changes.
- Provides a more visually appealing and revealing approach to highlighting what has happened because of activities in each location, and is especially helpful for showcasing networking and partnership-building.
- Received well by funders and external stakeholders interested in the programme but is resource-intensive in organising opportunities for stakeholders to come together (in-person or online) to collectively work on the maps.
- On reflection, we would have put on several mapping sessions spaced throughout the length of the projects to mitigate this, rather than rely on a single, final session where it was difficult to arrange for every relevant stakeholder to join.

#### Learning interviews

- Conducted internally with Spored staff at regular intervals to support programme planning and to collect supporting evidence for outcomes evaluation. These are helpful as part of an active learning strategy that uses learning to feed into delivery rather than solely as a reflective exercise.
- Interviews with group leaders were also conducted as part of an externally contracted evaluation for our London programme. These were helpful in giving groups more opportunities to reflect on the programme at length and elevated their voice in the story-telling of the work.

In fact, we found that an external end-of-project evaluation of Connected Communities-style programmes could have a number of benefits. These include:

- Providing greater capacity to conduct such an evaluation where existing resources are limited.
- Harnessing external expertise from those familiar with place-based programmes and the best ways in which to evaluate and learn from them.
- Supporting evaluation and learning where it can be helpful to have an outside perspective.
- Building a broader set of stakeholders around the cluster groups to include evaluators who can support clusters moving forward.

## Looking to the future

### Sustainability and long-term connections

Sported's vision for Connected Communities was to empower self-sustaining cluster groups working as a collective to co-produce responses to the challenges they identified as key for their communities. The long-term nature of this approach was one of the most important elements of the work. We wanted to ensure that local communities had the capacity to continue with their work as connected clusters once Sported's funded involvement finished.

We found the following were important foundations upon which to build the sustainability of the cluster groups:

- Develop long-term capacity throughout the course of the work to empower cluster groups to continue working together.
- Ensure co-ordinator roles are in place where necessary.
- Carefully manage the transition stage away from more direct Sported support, planning for this stage with community stakeholders well in advance.
- Reflect on any learning and evaluation and use this insight in shaping the next stages of the programme.

More generally, we found that the end of Sported's funded involvement didn't – and shouldn't – mean the end of our connection to the cluster groups. Instead, it just meant a change in relationship with the projects, moving from direct and regular co-ordinating input to a less formal supporting role.

### Informing a model of place-based working

Through our experience with Connected Communities, alongside learning from Sported's broader work across underserved communities around the UK, we developed a place-based working of working that can empower local communities to achieve sustainable, locally-driven solutions to locally-identified challenges.

The key lessons from Connected Communities have shaped our understanding of, and suggestions for, each stage of this kind of working:

- how to select the appropriate **location**
- developing knowledge to **prepare** engagement
- harnessing and building relationships to **connect** within communities
- growing individually or as a collective through resources that **build** capacity and **train** stakeholders
- focusing on the local to **identify** the most pressing needs

- supporting **action** to address these needs
- building working relationships and capacity to **sustain** such actions in the long-term
- promoting effective evaluation and learning to best **share** lessons learned

## Spoted Place Based Working

