

## Thriving in Nature Celebration and Learning Event at Asthall Manor

# Workshop notes

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**On Monday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2025, around 60 people gathered at Asthall Manor near Burford to celebrate Oxfordshire Community Foundation's Thriving in Nature Fund.**

This fund helps more people prosper by engaging with green spaces and the rural environment. Supported by a collective of donors, the fund makes grants to local charities that improve health and wellbeing and nurture work opportunities by uniting people with nature.

The guests consisted of donors to the fund; charities that had received grants from the fund; and others interested in the fund.

OCF staff facilitated a workshop session at the event, where participants discussed four topics in smaller groups, designed to capture learning from the first year of Thriving in Nature grants.

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### What delivery charities would like from funders

#### Flexible application processes

- Forms change too much between schemes – would prefer more accessible forms, or even universal forms across funders
- Smaller groups often overlooked due to needing an 'oven ready' plan, would like to see earlier stage/security funding available
- Better signposting for available schemes or relevant funding rounds needed
- Normalise handholding – mentoring grant applications helps smaller groups
- Give smaller groups more chances to network at events, such as funder fairs – many groups said these events are fantastic
- One charity mentioned that they often do not know who the funders are when receiving a grant via OCF until after the award – raising concerns about potentially duplicating applications and causing frustration among funders
- Funders with a kind approach make the process smoother for everyone – OCF was praised for this

#### Long-term investment in resources

- Paid roles are harder to implement for smaller groups, which leads to more projects collapsing in early phases – many groups suggested multi-year funding is a necessity
- Obtaining volunteers is getting harder, meaning more funding for paid roles may be necessary to plug the gap, as well as funding to recruit, train and upskill volunteers

## **Realistic impact measurement**

- Rethinking the impact part of applications/progress reports – data collation can be an intrusive process in fields such as mental health
- Expensive and detail heavy to produce professional materials and brochures – difficult to define the 'story' that will persuade funders; can they offer specific funding for impact reports? Or signposting to volunteers with this expertise?

## **What funders would like from delivery charities**

### **Impact reporting: combining data and storytelling**

- A balance of hard data (e.g. KPIs) and engaging personal stories – reflecting OCF's 'heart and head' approach to impact reporting which funders shared they are happy with
- Baseline levels of reporting from charities
- Charities shared that gathering consistent quantitative data can be challenging, time-consuming, and sometimes not reflective of actual impact – particularly when outcomes are complex or better captured qualitatively; some charities felt that qualitative evidence, such as participant stories, offers a more accurate picture of their work
- Funders expressed interest in receiving video content to showcase impact stories

### **In-person engagement**

- Opportunities to visit grantee charities once or twice a year to build relationships and gain a clearer understanding of their work
- Some charities already hold open events during the year and would be happy to invite funders to attend; however, charities noted that arranging individual visits involves significant logistics – particularly for smaller organisations with limited resources
- A suggestion was made for charities to take turns in hosting an open event, inviting both funders and fellow grantees, to ease the logistical burden

## **Challenges the groups faced in implementing their plans, and how they addressed them**

### **Staff and partner challenges**

- A staff member left who was implementing the project, a new staff member took over and started to take the project in a different direction; intervention helped to bring it back on track
- One group had to start talks with the third party all over again when there was a change in personnel with their partner organisation.

### **Weather**

- Delays to starting project due to rain, frozen ground and flooding, long period of downtime over the winter, a long wait until late spring to see the full benefit of planting



## Engaging the local community

- Had to work hard to engage communities not so physically close the area of the project
- Unfortunately, one group experienced racism when accessing their allotment; however, other allotment users quickly came together to stamp this out and show their support to the group, working together to help the group to become well-known and valued members of the allotment community

## Changes of plan

- One group spoke of how they wanted to achieve everything so quickly, but realised this wasn't practical; decided to pick off the 'low-hanging fruit' first to make progress
- Another group discovered that service users wanted to be far more involved than anticipated – a good problem to have but had to think about communication to make sure everyone knew what they were doing

Overall, the workshop group expressed an interest in having some kind of peer support group for grantees to talk through issues and challenges together.

## Opportunities that arose during implementation

### Significantly scaling up

- Actually starting projects that had been in the planning for months or years (Her Land), or reinvigorating projects such as an old beehive (Maymessy)
- Being able to employ new staff thanks to the multi-year grant commitments (OCA – bike mechanic; coordinator – Benson Area Nature Group; administrator – Long Mead; Wellbeing Coordinator – RHJYC)
- Engaging with new beneficiary groups, such as younger or older people (OCA, RHJYC)
- Recruiting new volunteers
- Accepting donated items such as bikes (240!), gardening equipment etc (OCA, Cheney School)
- Expanding into new locations (OCA – shorter, more local hikes as an entry point)
- Putting on new events (Cheney School – greening day)

### Genuinely empowering beneficiaries

- Beneficiaries moving beyond formal learning to become teachers or volunteers (Pennyhooks), or taking their learning into the community (RHJYC)
- Beneficiaries wanting to plan and influence how things are done (KEEN) – participant-led approach
- Evolving their whole operating model to move beyond immediate needs to longer-term solutions (eg FarmAbility creating a skills pathway towards employment)
- Transforming individual mental health (eg a bee suit bringing a girl with anxiety out of her shell at Maymessy; a boy who had been electively mute telling people about his weekend at Pennyhooks; kids finding their place at last at KEEN)

### Building partnerships and collaborations

- With OCF – via honest conversations about what's needed, with flexibility built in to adapt projects as needed
- With other groups – including at the Asthall event – feeling less alone

