

Blog on Local Authority Learning Partnerships – January 2023

Resilient Green Spaces is a £1.27m partnership project led by Social Farms & Gardens to pilot alternative re-localised food systems using communities and their green spaces as the driving force for change across Wales until June 2023.

This project is funded through the Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, which is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Welsh Government.

As part of [Resilient Green Spaces](#), [Shared Assets](#) and the [Landworkers' Alliance](#) have been working to increase community access to land for agroecological farming. This has involved working on many different parts of the system to try and generate change, such as gathering evidence on the current barriers to community access to land in Wales, understanding the needs, wants and capacity of people seeking land, joining up data sources on maps of public land, writing up case studies of good practice, and offering the opportunity to secure £100,000 towards the purchase of land for agroecological and community-based farming. One more recent activity we've been coordinating, since September 2022, is regular 'learning partnership' meetings for local authority representatives across Wales who are interested in supporting community access to land.

The idea for these meetings emerged from events and conversations we had with several different local authorities earlier in 2022, when it became clear there was a desire to have an open and honest space to share learnings and experiences with each other around supporting their communities to access land for food growing. As a bit of an experiment, Shared Assets and the Landworkers' Alliance then began jointly organising a time for a monthly call, lightly facilitating the discussions at these meetings, and sharing the notes afterwards. Sometimes we've arranged for speakers to come and talk about their work to spark conversation around a particular topic, such as setting up a Community Supported Agriculture scheme on Health Board land, but mostly the local authority staff and elected representatives who attend have more than enough to talk about amongst themselves – sometimes based around a theme that's been suggested by the group (e.g. navigating the planning system), or just more generally on their recent experiences.

Normally between about five and ten local authority colleagues turn up, and there seems to be a sense of trust and relationships deepening amongst this relatively small group. The people who attend know they can share their challenges and frustrations in confidence with the other group members, but can also suggest and share resources they've put together to overcome certain issues so that not every public body has to start from scratch when thinking about boosting community access to land. Where Shared Assets or the Landworkers' Alliance can offer advice or signpost to our contacts who might have expertise on a particular topic, we do, but primarily these meetings are a space for peer learning. The local authorities who have participated say they enjoy hearing about

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things happening in other areas, the showcasing of solutions and being able to ask how these have come about, and benefit from being able to have discussions with like-minded people who are onside with what they are trying to achieve and understand the barriers. Shared Assets and the Landworkers' Alliance have also gained a lot from being able to build closer relationships with people within local authorities who share our goals, and with whom we can work across the Resilient Green Spaces project, and beyond.

If other organisations think a similar approach to engaging with and supporting local authorities might be useful for their work around a particular topic, here are some of our top tips:

- **Set the foundation well** - it's useful to establish some shared 'ground rules' at the start of any such meeting (such as 'Chatham House rules') so that participants feel comfortable to speak openly
- **Allow spaciousness, and finish early if necessary** – we allow 90 minutes for our calls, which feels like a good amount of time to get into a topic in depth, but also for some tangents to be explored. However, we are always open to ending early if it feels like a conversation is finished, since everyone's time is precious
- **Provide a balance between structure and flexibility** – we try to share calendar invitations with everyone interested several months in advance, and people are welcome to drop in and out from month to month, or send a colleague in their place, as we know other priorities can come up at the last minute. Also, while it can be helpful to have a topic in mind for a meeting, and perhaps send a couple of questions around in advance to get people thinking, much of the richness of these calls comes from the meandering conversations and making unexpected links and connections, so it's good to allow space for those too.

Over the next few months, we will be trying to transition these meetings to a community of practice model which can be self-sustained by local authority representatives even after the Resilient Green Spaces project ends.

When there is so much pressure on local authority staff and councils' land and other resources, it is important to pro-actively create spaces to generate ideas, problem solve, celebrate and commiserate together. From our experience, we think these help build the relationships, between and beyond local authorities that are crucial to increasing access to land for more people in Wales.

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