

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Project background

- Between October 2023 and March 2024 the National Survivor User Network (NSUN) engaged in learning to answer key questions around the organisation's capacity- and community-building work, primarily delivered through the 'Community Constellations' programme which has been funded by the National Lottery Community Fund since 2021, and to develop learning frameworks to support future work.

Key questions

- 'To what extent is "capacity building" a core part of NSUN's work, and what does this look like across different functions and teams (e.g., policy, comms, finance, ops)?'
- 'What approaches does NSUN use, and what impacts have these approaches had?'
- 'How can this work shift power in the sector?'
- 'Relational and responsive approaches have helped NSUN to carry out its capacity- building and community-building work. How can NSUN ensure that these approaches are also balanced with reliability, accessibility, fairness and transparency?'
- 'How can NSUN develop a flexible framework for learning from, monitoring and improving these approaches?'

Describing capacity-building

- Working backwards from impact, it felt most helpful to think about capacity-building within NSUN as 'work that supports a user-led group's means to sustainably function'. This definition takes into account two key ideas that were often expressed when we discussed capacity-building: interconnectivity and sustainability.

CAPACITY-BUILDING AND NSUN

Examples of capacity-building activities

- NSUN's Theory of Change groups the organisation's work into four themes.
- For knowledge, activities included commissioning research and evaluation support.
- For collaboration, activities included hosting projects and facilitating small networks.
- For voice, activities included publishing open letters and amplifying member content.
- For resourcing, activities included grants programmes and commissioning training.

NSUN's role

- As an infrastructure organisation, NSUN often has a 'bridging' function, and sustains an elasticity in responding to need. This can be tricky to capture and articulate.
- Terms used to describe NSUN's role included: knowledge sharing, facilitating, hosting, influencing, amplifying, and resourcing financially.

A relational approach

- NSUN takes a relational approach which centres trust, reciprocity, meeting people where they're at, navigating power dynamics, and making connections.

A responsive approach

- NSUN takes a responsive approach which centres balancing, adapting, reactivity, and understanding the ecosystem and needs.

REDISTRIBUTING POWER AND RESOURCE

The mental health space

- NSUN is an infrastructure organisation, supporting people and grassroots groups with lived experience of mental ill-health, distress or trauma, working to redistribute power and resource in the mental health landscape.
- Some of the ways NSUN aims to meaningfully redistribute power in the space include questioning awareness and visibility, holding risk, and enabling knowledge.

NSUN's Theory of Change

- In 2022, the staff team took time to reflect on the organisation's strategic direction, expressed as a Theory of Change document.
- Through diverse and constellated routes, capacity-focused efforts can help bring about the long-term outcomes NSUN has identified in the Theory of Change.
- Many of the identified outcomes are reflected in member feedback.

Impacts and outcomes

- NSUN's annual Members' Questionnaire helps the team to understand the impacts of NSUN's work. The feedback and ideas shared help sense-check in relation to NSUN's long-term outcomes and the horizon described in the Theory of Change.
- Some of the key areas we wanted to learn more about were how members like interacting with NSUN, responses to how the organisation is evolving, and different ideas about what NSUN should be doing more of or focusing on.

APPROACHES AND VALUES

Reflections on values

- We considered how we can ensure that NSUN's relational and responsive approaches to capacity-building are balanced with four key values: reliability, accessibility, fairness and transparency.

Approaching working relationships

- It was acknowledged that NSUN has a tendency to form longer-term working relationships with a smaller number of groups, which were described as overwhelmingly positive.
- We considered how NSUN might go about making connections with groups currently not known to the organisation, and similarly how these groups might come to learn what NSUN can offer.
- A careful, considered approach to work inherently takes much more time. There is a need to manage finite internal capacity and to acknowledge limitations to what NSUN can offer.



FRAMEWORKS FOR LEARNING

How learning happens within NSUN

- Learning and change is happening continuously, not only at dedicated points.
- Many important learning moments are happening organically, outside of structured processes, often 'live' in spaces shared with members.
- Learning happens in lots of different ways, not through a single process.
- Relational and responsive approaches have helped create the right conditions for learning and change working this way.

Articulating our approach

- Relational and responsive approaches create the conditions for continuous learning and change. Learning is meaningfully participatory and collaborative, mutually beneficial, and ultimately shifts power to members.
- 'Continuous learning': our framework reflects that we are continuously engaged in monitoring, evaluation and learning, and captures informal and less tangible change.
- 'Convening': we make space to convene and collaborate to integrate learning, reflecting on this continuous process, and developing the methodology.
- 'Communicating': we want to articulate and communicate about learning and change, creating room for conversation and collective learning.

Developing flexible frameworks

- We want to try: dedicated spaces to share and reflect on learning together.
- We want to try: thinking more about how we communicate learning and change.
- We want to try: different ways of ensuring learning activities are equitable.