



**National Survivor
User Network**

COMMUNITY CONSTELLATIONS

EXPLORING NSUN'S ROLE IN CAPACITY-BUILDING

Written by Jodie Gow, NSUN Learning Partner,
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- Mish Loraine, Secretary at North East Together ([website](#), [X](#), [Facebook](#))
- Hat Porter, survivor researcher and activist ([X](#))
- Shuranjeet Singh, Founder and Director, Taraki ([website](#))

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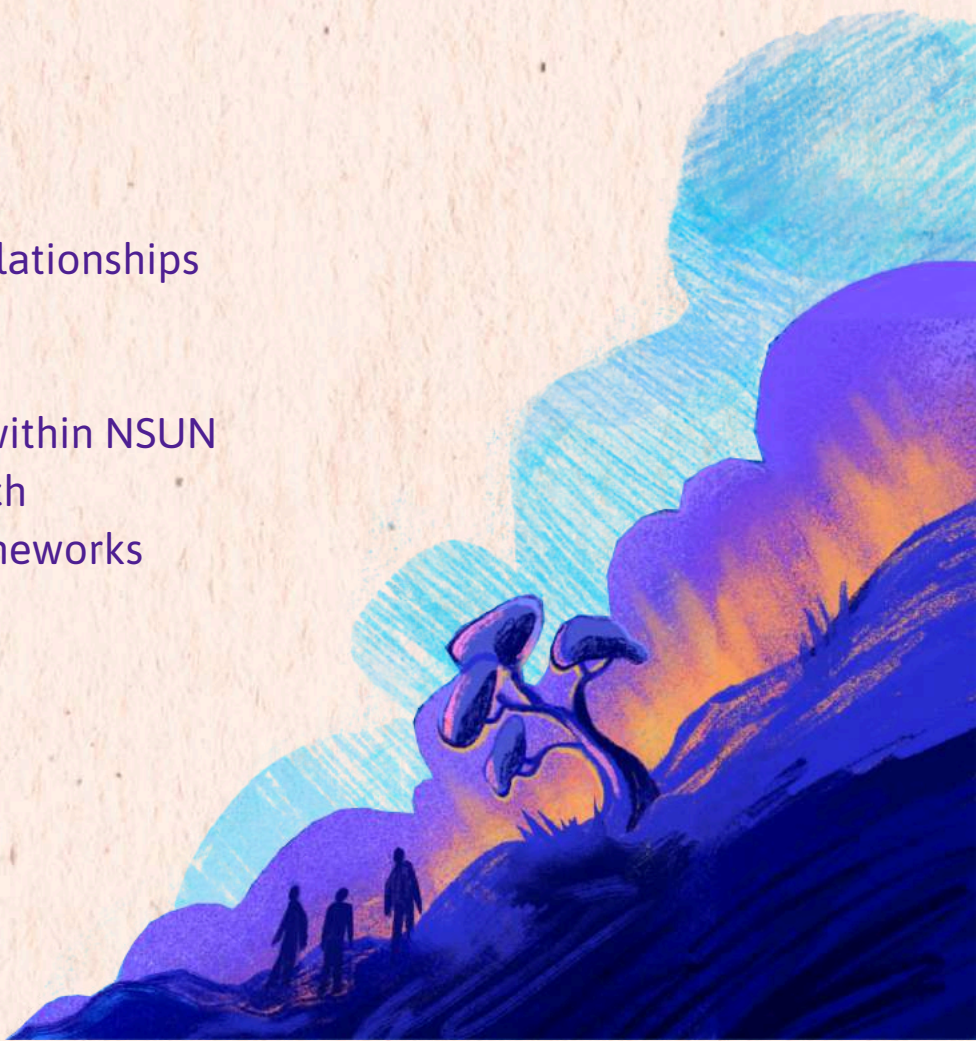
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.

INTRODUCTION

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Since 2021, the National Survivor User Network (NSUN) has been funded by the National Lottery Community Fund to carry out capacity-building work through the **Community Constellations** programme.

In by-and-for, user-led groups, people with shared lived experiences convene to provide diverse support in response to need. NSUN's experience has shown that work in this space requires an approach that centres relationship-building and mutual trust. User-led groups are the experts in what they do, and what they need to build capacity: NSUN's role is to support and facilitate this work.

Between October 2023 and March 2024, NSUN engaged in learning to answer key questions around the organisation's capacity- and community-building work, and to develop learning frameworks to support future work. Learning activities included all-staff shared spaces, individual staff meetings and surveys, consultation with members with whom NSUN has worked on shared projects, wider membership feed-in via annual survey, and desk research.

A central aim of these activities was to reflect on, share and articulate all that has been learned so far with, and from, NSUN members. Acknowledging that learning will continue outside of this piece of work, part-formed ideas, and questions without answers, were very much welcomed throughout.

This report explores NSUN's approach to capacity-building, and how this work can redistribute power and resource in mental health. Through asking questions about how learning happens organisationally, we began to develop flexible frameworks for monitoring, evaluating, and learning from approaches.

This work was supported by a Learning Partner, Jodie Gow, a freelance consultant. My role was to facilitate engagement and learning activities, help spot patterns, and articulate findings through an interim and final report.

KEY QUESTIONS

We began with the following key questions:

1. 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)?
2. What approaches does NSUN use, and what impacts have these approaches had?
3. How can this work shift power in the sector?
4. 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?
5. How can NSUN develop a flexible framework for learning from, monitoring and improving these approaches?

As we set out to answer these questions, we learned that our understanding of some concepts or terms differed, or changed depending on the context to which they were being applied. Though more of a common language was developed throughout the process, it is helpful to acknowledge that some of the words utilised to engage with the subjects of these questions, and represented in quotations in this report, will mean different things to different people.

Similarly, it felt important to recognise the multiplicity of truths as we worked to understand, articulate, and learn from our work. We were fortunate to be able to have people with a range of perspectives — staff with diverse roles within NSUN, and members who we’d collaborated with in different ways — engage with these questions in the contexts that were most relevant to them. We appreciate that there will be further perspectives that might be missing, including those who did not have the capacity to participate. We hope that we can build on our answers to these questions as dialogue continues.

The sections of this report map out our responses to engaging with different aspects of the key questions. Very often, figuring out answers to one part naturally led us back to another, or sparked an idea for a relevant, adjacent question to explore. Due to the interconnected nature of the focuses, some key ideas and themes came up in multiple spaces.

In the conclusion of this report, we will return to the key questions above, summarising our learnings most relevant to each aspect.

DESCRIBING CAPACITY-BUILDING

How might we define and describe capacity-building?

As we began to engage with the questions, it was acknowledged that the term and concept of 'capacity-building' felt somewhat elusive, "jargon-y", and sometimes tricky to articulate. It was often easier to first identify examples of capacity-building, especially in relation to impact for user-led groups. Examples of capacity-building activities have been listed in the following section.

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.

There are other ways that capacity-building work can be described in different contexts, or for those with different roles or perspectives. For example, a movement- or sector-level definition might highlight a broader outcome.

Capacity is made up of interconnected functions

Some forms of capacity-building — particularly the more 'nuts and bolts' support around procedure and policy — help user-led groups develop the infrastructure they need to continue and develop in the ways they want to. Having and understanding procedure around data, for example, helps free up time for facilitating a shared space, and continues to serve the group over time. Others might carry further the voice and message of a group, for

example, NSUN hosting an open letter to utilise its own reach to boost that of another organisation.

We sometimes used the word 'indirect' to refer to certain mechanisms of capacity-building, perhaps reflecting a feeling of being less close to the impact. There are examples of work that can support capacity in user-led groups in ways that are more difficult to quantify or include on a list. For example, the weekly bulletin saves members time and research, and helps foster a sense of connection to the wider movement.

It was useful to consider capacity as a constellation, rather than a line from one point to another. The term "ripple effect" was used to describe the hopes of longer-lasting impact beyond the life of a particular capacity-building project.

It was also helpful to acknowledge that considering how the interconnected nature of capacity can be overwhelming, it may be more difficult to recognise or communicate how less 'direct' methods are building capacity.

"I think some models of capacity-building can be viewing things going in straight lines, and actually they don't, they're much more interconnected. It's very hard to interrupt those cycles with small interventions." — NSUN staff member

Sustainability is capacity

We recognised that not all user-led groups want to 'scale up', and that it's important not to equate capacity-building with growth. There was an acknowledgement that it is important not to endeavour to 'professionalise' groups unless that's something they're aiming to do.

A lot of reflections around sustainability came down to individual time and energy, especially when one person held specific responsibility for a project. Being able to financially support someone carrying out their work was an

example of a capacity-building practice that helped ensure the sustainability of contributing time and efforts, and therefore of the group.

“A lot of the time it’s not about supporting organisations to scale up, but helping them move from treading water, if you like, to doing what they’re doing in a more sustainable way; that’s less likely to lead to burnout.” — NSUN staff member



CAPACITY-BUILDING AND NSUN

EXAMPLES OF CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

The staff team and others interviewed considered capacity-building one of the key pillars of NSUN's work. There were numerous, overlapping examples of capacity-building activities and outputs across functions and teams, including many that sit outside of the Community Constellations programme.

NSUN's **Theory of Change**, developed in 2022, articulates the organisation's strategic direction. The full document is included for reference later in the report.

The Theory of Change groups NSUN's work into four themes: **knowledge, collaboration, voice, and resourcing**.

The capacity-building examples named below have been listed with the theme they might best fit, though many activities span more than one area of work, and all are interconnected as mechanisms for change.

Knowledge

- Commissioning research
- Knowledge sharing (e.g., around funding)
- Skill sharing and development opportunities
- Evaluation support
- Support to develop a training/consultancy offer
- Comms support (e.g., proofreading)
- Support to develop objectives
- Support to develop relevant, values-aligned safeguarding procedures
- Developing knowledge through carrying out projects in partnership

Collaboration

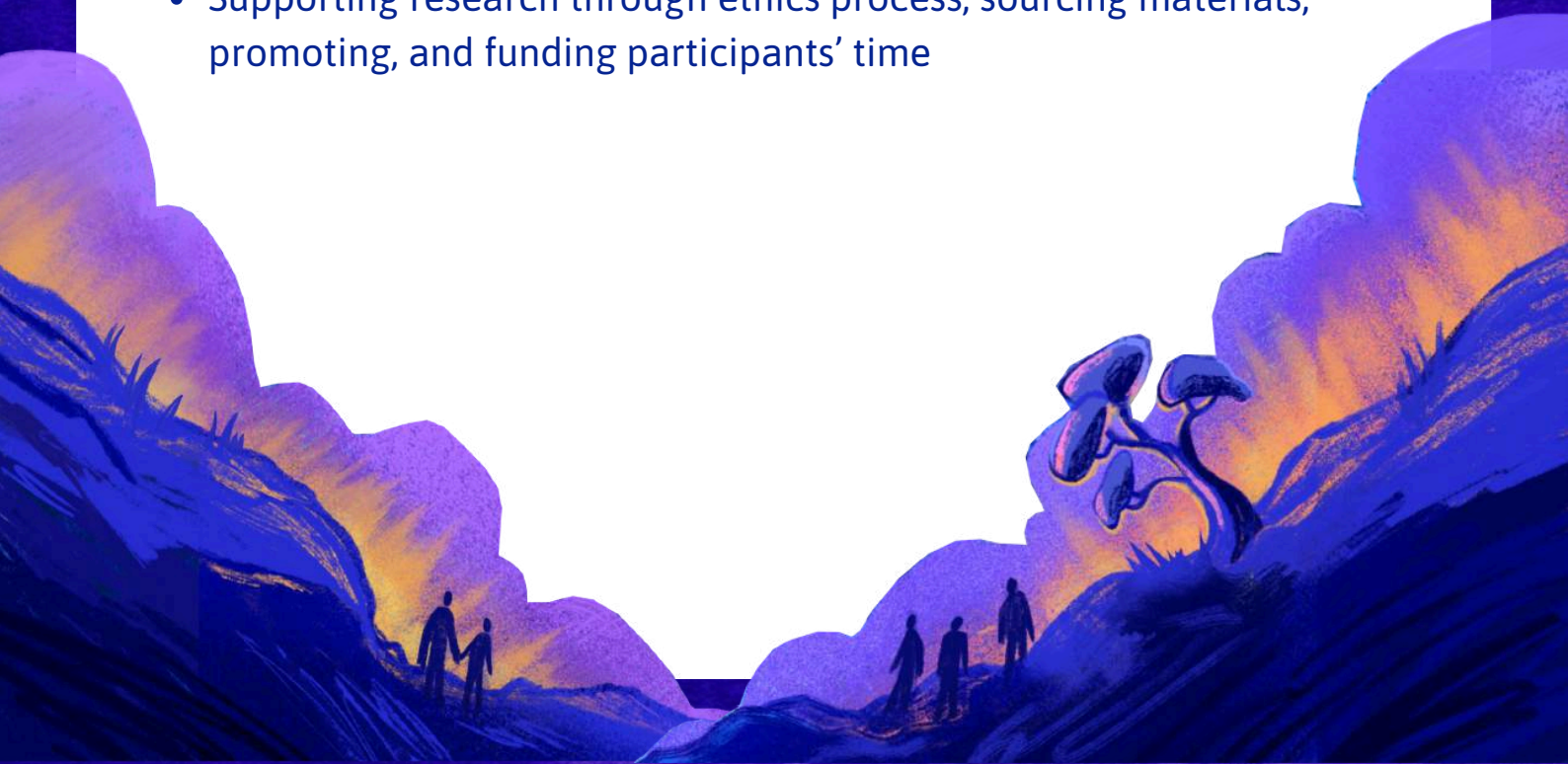
- Supporting a hosted project with ambitions to build own membership
- Facilitating a smaller closed network, e.g., for young people and people doing youth-led work
- Reflection spaces
- Creating networking opportunities
- Linking up members to support each other through evaluation processes
- Hosting events
- Weekly bulletin and social media sharing external opportunities, training, events, and funding

Voice

- Jointly publishing open letters
- Jointly publishing petitions
- Commissioning and publishing pieces on the website
- Weekly bulletin and social media amplifying members' projects

Resourcing

- Grants and micro-grants programmes
- Linking up to grants from other organisations
- Infrastructure support (e.g., around managing data)
- Commissioning training
- Supporting research through ethics process, sourcing materials, promoting, and funding participants' time



NSUN'S ROLE

What is NSUN's role?

"In an ideal world, the work is making possible a community of people who are able to connect. Sometimes it feels very intangible, the way we do that." — NSUN staff member

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, as it is highly reactive, and sometimes happens over unpredictable timescales. When exploring how capacity-building is a core part of NSUN's work, often we found ourselves reaching for terms that encompass multifaceted approaches.

Though our exploration and articulation of NSUN's role in capacity-building was without direct reference to the Theory of Change, the roles identified below can be broadly situated within a primary theme, though many overlap.

Theme → NSUN's role

Knowledge → knowledge sharing

Collaboration → facilitating, hosting

Voice → influencing, amplifying

Resourcing → resourcing financially



Knowledge

Knowledge sharing

The understanding and expertise that NSUN has developed from and with its members — and its readiness to share it — was another capacity-building role identified.

“I think there is really simple stuff that people need and want to know — what kind of structures or legal structures are available? Do you need insurance? How do you manage finances? How do you keep your books? What are funders looking for when they're reading your application?

I don't think [this kind of support] is really offered anywhere in quite a critical way . . . [considering] any kind of criticality of the politics of funding in this space. I don't know if it's NSUN's hope or intention to be providing more of that kind of stuff, but I do think there is potential for it.” — Interviewee

Collaboration

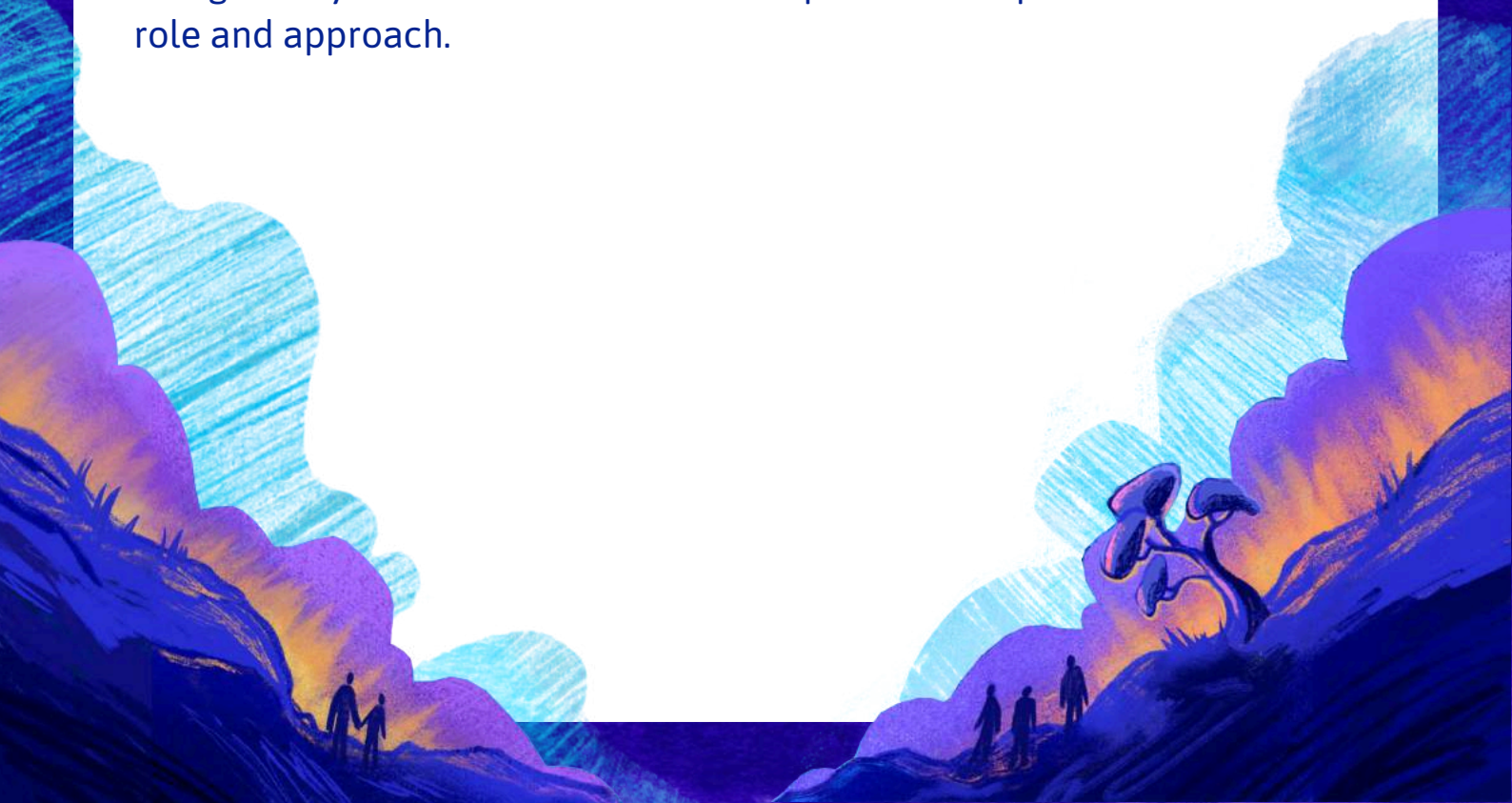
Facilitating

Perhaps the most commonly offered terms used to describe the organisation's role were those describing NSUN as ‘facilitator’, ‘connector’, or a ‘glue’ between different organisations or groups.

The analogy of supporting someone to build a house was utilised by an interviewee to explore NSUN's approach to capacity-building. They described four different aspects of a coordinating role:

- Capacity-strengthening: “You’ve got the importance of folks who know how to build a house, supporting people to be able to access the right materials, in a way that makes sense for them. When the organisation facilitating has access to expertise.”
- Convening: “I think there's real power and importance in convening. You can have all these organisations who have built their houses, but if we can't create the space for them to talk, how are we able to actually collectively mobilise? Sometimes it's not adding new stuff, it's just being able to coordinate and convene existing stuff.”
- Collaboration: “There might be organisations who want to work together, but are finding it difficult to have the time to actually hash out those relationships, and understand how to develop that way of working, and maybe they need a bit of support in making that happen.”
- Creating impact: “Capacity strengthening is a part of that, convening is a part of that, collaboration is a part of that. But there's other things that go into that, like supporting monitoring and evaluation, supporting folks with other types of skills that might be needed to help them make an impact.”

NSUN’s work with **Taraki** (who work with Punjabi communities to shape positive futures in mental health by mobilising key avenues of change) was given by an interviewee as an example of the impact of this kind of role and approach.



“Something that sticks in my mind is when we were commissioned by Student Minds to run **peer support spaces** during the pandemic for Punjabi students. Part of that work was a requirement that we had a safeguarding policy. NSUN [worked] with us to **co-develop the safeguarding policy** in a way that was reflective of our values as an organisation and how we approach things.

That was a really awesome process. It was very iterative, very open, very critical. It was very pragmatic at the end as well, actually getting this into practice. I think it's key and, in a way, decentering NSUN as the locus of change. Ultimately, we want folks and organisations and members to be sparks of change in and of themselves.”

Hosting

Hosting projects is an important part of NSUN’s work. The sense of sharing resource, shouldering some risk, and ‘making space’ was highlighted throughout discussion of approaches to working with the wider membership.

“NSUN is a funny little organisation, in that it is so specific and it’s hard to articulate exactly what it is.” — Interviewee



“The ethos behind wanting to host goes right back in NSUN’s history to having been a hosted project itself, before it became a charity. We’ve hosted North East Together for a number of years now, and that’s kind of evolved. In recent years, it’s been able to, through those infrastructures of support, access more funding, and is now at a point where it’s seeking funding, needing more capacity . . . enabling them to do grant schemes and things they wouldn’t have otherwise been able to do.” — NSUN staff member

NSUN has been able to be flexible both in its support for hosted projects, and ‘making space’ for members. Examples given of NSUN’s support in this role included providing time-related support, where the staff team assist with particular tasks.

Voice

Influencing

There was a sense of NSUN being in a position to lend, or share, its influence. Words such as ‘clout’ were sometimes used to describe NSUN’s position within the community of practice, and an interviewee noted “the extent to which they share that with members is capacity-building in itself.”

The idea of influence felt particularly relevant to conversations around power, discourse, and responding to a multiplicity of voices.

The opportunity to utilise NSUN’s position and collective expertise to influence funders was discussed.

“I think that trying to influence funders where we can is an area that could be strengthened to indirectly help build user-led group capacity, as we have a lot of knowledge from our research, and can make recommendations for best practice. But I think this would need to involve more work trying to build relationships with grant-making organisations, which is time-intensive.” — NSUN staff member

Amplifying

Suggestions of ways in which NSUN is able to amplify voices included jointly publishing open letters and petitions, and commissioning and publishing pieces on the website.

Amplifying voices in the space has a number of impacts: with a focus on “promoting things that speak to members’ needs”, it helps “bridge the gap for groups who may be disconnected.” — NSUN staff member

When it came to campaigns, some also spoke to a nervousness around taking the voice of a member further into the public space, where “it may not be taken in the way we mean it to be” but rather, “exploited or misrepresented or challenged.” — NSUN staff member

Resourcing

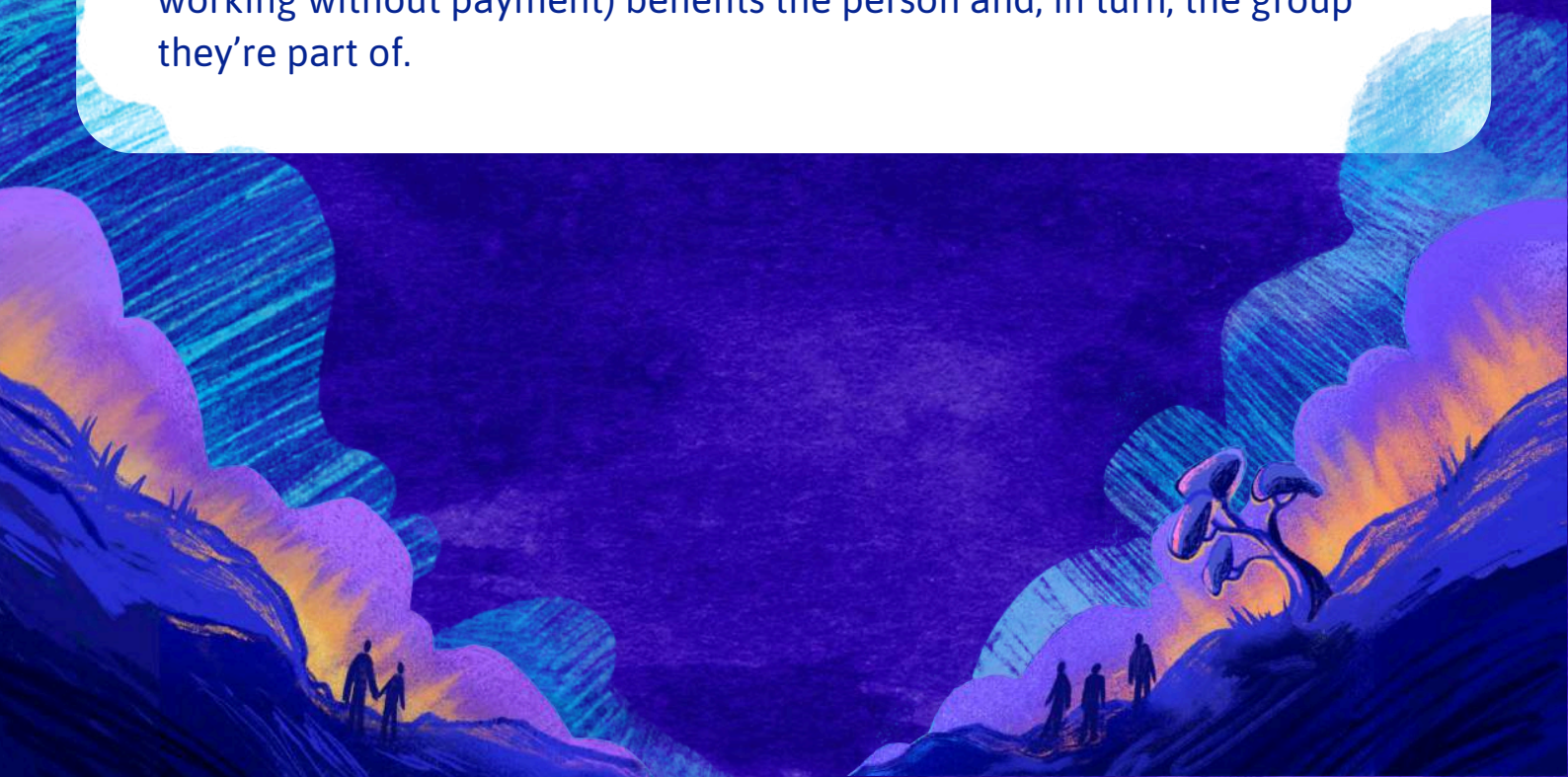
Resourcing financially

Naturally, funding is a resource that most, perhaps all, groups will always need and be able to utilise. Two examples given frequently were grants, including micro-grants, and paying members to write and publish work.

When it comes to grants, care has been taken to develop a process that is as simple, flexible, and low-impact in terms of time as possible, for example by having minimal reporting requirements.

“Funding being disproportionately hard to apply for, and requiring loads of time and energy, is something we know is a key barrier to user-led groups being able to [access it.]” — NSUN staff member

NSUN being able to financially resource members to write and publish a piece for the website, for example, supports the sustainability of their work. Not only is a resource made available to be shared and learned from, but paying for someone’s time (who may otherwise be largely working without payment) benefits the person and, in turn, the group they’re part of.



A RELATIONAL APPROACH

We spent some time exploring the relational and responsive approaches which underpin NSUN's varied roles: how they help to carry out capacity- and community-building work, and the impacts they have. Reflecting on the different aspects of these approaches was useful in further articulating how NSUN works, encompassing what NSUN does in its varied roles.

These approaches are rooted in a willingness to listen and learn, and underlying trust that user-led groups are best placed to decide what they need.

Trust

Trust is front of mind when approaching work. The staff team reflected on how trust is intentionally and meaningfully built over time. "I've really noticed personally the need to take time to build trust and demonstrate my intentions." - NSUN staff member

Members collaborating on projects felt trusted to carry out their work, and communicated the benefits of this approach.

"It's felt like we've been trusted to be able to manage the balance and nuance of people's experiences. There's lots of challenges . . . just trusting that we're able to manage that has helped with confidence." — Interviewee

Regarding a grant, "we were given choice and flexibility about how to use that, whether that be to resource our time, or for particular things to help with the campaign." — Interviewee

Reciprocity

Reciprocity was described as “accounting for the stuff that often gets missed. So accounting for time, accounting for the emotional weight of certain things that people might do in the space, accounting for power differentials.” — NSUN staff member

The most frequent example given of reciprocity was financially resourcing time.

“It's hard to build relationships that are entirely equal. Really, what you end up having to do is just be honest about the different contexts and power dynamics.” — NSUN staff member

Meeting people where they're at

It was acknowledged that it is often helpful to approach relationships in a more human-to-human, less ‘professionalised’ way. Meeting in person, when possible, can be meaningful in terms of relationship-building. There are at times limitations to NSUN’s ability to respond in the most ‘ideal’ way: for example, being a remote organisation, staff may not always be able to travel to where a group is based.

“We try to meet people where they're at and not assume any knowledge on the part of groups about who we are or what we're doing. [We] put in effort to demonstrate what we're about and that we're engaged and show interest.” — NSUN staff member



Navigating power dynamics

There was an awareness of navigating power dynamics, and how this might affect a working relationship. “Navigating with care those power dynamics that come up as we’re approaching those conversations, particularly with the hosted projects, because we have this weird kind of balance of being legally responsible for them and their actions and reputation. You’re responsible at some level, and actually wanting them to kind of be independent entities as much as possible.” — NSUN staff member

Making connections

The potential for relationship-building that resourcing brings was articulated as something that could be considered an approach in and of itself.

“I originally thought that a lot of the grants work was the capacity-building, but I think I look at it more now as an approach as well. It allows us to build relationships with a lot of different groups. I think that opens up more opportunities because they’re visible to us. You have to become a member to apply for grants, so you can see what you can get involved in.

I think the grants programmes do a nice job of adding to groups capacity through the actual funding, but also building those connections, so that we can build a relationship with them. They can, in certain spaces, build relationships with each other as well.” — NSUN staff member

A RESPONSIVE APPROACH

Balancing

There was a balance to be found in being led by members' requests and trying out ideas based on experience and knowledge of working with a diverse membership.

“I think it’s that combination between absolutely hearing and responding to what groups say they need and providing that, but also doing some thinking ourselves. Testing ideas, seeing how they land, and if they’re not working, being able to put them aside, has felt like an important part, strategically, of how we’ve approached some of that work.” — NSUN staff member

Adapting

NSUN has been able to adapt to the needs of groups where intentions for a piece of work were initially somewhat different. For example, in campaigns-focused work with migrant justice groups, it was found that there was a need for capacity-building: building up people’s ability to be part of a coalition, or trying new things together. This practice has also been relevant for hosted projects, where NSUN has been in a position to adapt and problem solve in response to need.

Factors named as helping enable NSUN to be adaptive included some funding being relatively flexible and non-directive, cross-team working and being able to pick things up for each other.

As a user-led organisation and network of groups and individuals with lived experience of mental ill-health, distress and trauma, with a focus on shifting power and resource, NSUN has some difference in priorities and working context to mainstream mental health-focused organisations. This gives somewhat more freedom to adapt approaches in response to need, whilst still working towards this key objective.

Reactivity

Similarly, reactivity — to feedback, ideas or requests — is woven throughout NSUN's roles in capacity-building.

"[Reactivity] I think is something that in some approaches we do really well and in some approaches we don't. Somewhere we do that really well is in the funding approaches, where we've got quite a good handle on why people don't go for funding opportunities, what pushes people away. And what can kind of intervene in that, what makes people think, oh, okay, maybe I could go for this. Trying to make the very small amount of funding that we can offer accessible, transparent, and relatively easy for people to access in terms of the time etc. that they're spending on applications.

I guess the other side of that, though, is that it's an application process, it's not everybody gets what they asked for. There's that tension in there with resources." — NSUN staff member

Understanding the ecosystem and needs

NSUN continues to strive to gain a better understanding of user-led groups that might not currently be on the organisation's radar. It is understood, for example, that many groups engaged in relevant projects don't primarily identify in ways we might use to find, identify or describe them: *"there are a bunch of groups doing things out there, even if it's not framed as being part of, say, a survivor movement."* - NSUN staff member

This commitment to actively learning more felt like an important part of a responsive approach. *"I don't think it's the case that we are now perfectly in tune with that ecosystem, but I do think things have shifted quite a lot both in terms of how NSUN understands this stuff, and of how I'm seeing it spoken about in other contexts."* - NSUN staff member

It was noted that some 'standardised' models of capacity-building utilised in the charity sector often aren't effective because they don't fully acknowledge or interrupt crises of resourcing and capacity.

There was resistance to where these models create a sense of there being an 'endpoint' that groups endeavour to get to.

A responsive approach centres genuine engagement, listening and learning — especially with parts of the ecosystem NSUN is less connected to — rather than reflexively doing things the way they've always been done.



REDISTRIBUTING POWER AND RESOURCE

THE MENTAL HEALTH SPACE

NSUN's position in the space

NSUN is an infrastructure organisation, supporting people and groups with lived experience of mental ill-health, distress or trauma, working to redistribute power and resource in the mental health landscape.

Critical thought is given to how power and resource — from grants to knowledge — flow through the organisation. There is an awareness of the importance of avoiding becoming inadvertent gatekeepers, or speaking on anyone's behalf.

Some of the ways NSUN aims to **meaningfully redistribute power** include questioning awareness and visibility, holding risk, and enabling knowledge.

“Our aim is to strengthen, amplify, and build connections with and between grassroots groups and people with lived experience so that they can create meaningful change for their and our communities.” (**Redistributing power and resource in mental health**, NSUN)

Grassroots community groups

Grassroots groups, organised by and for **communities of shared experience**, provide diverse support in response to need.

“Many don’t explicitly describe themselves as user-led, or as being primarily mental health-focussed. They often do not see their experiences of mental distress and trauma as separate to other and multiple forms of marginalisation and oppression. None see their work as an add-on to statutory services. Their centre of gravity is their own self-defined community and that community’s specific needs. They face many challenges and their **needs are rarely met**.

Traditional funding and capacity-building structures currently keep these groups precarious, **excluding them from funding streams due to capacity, funding, or evidence requirements**. We want to meet groups where they are at. We want to honour their mission and make the case for the often-invisible labour of grassroots groups to be valued, understood, and funded.” (**What We Do**, NSUN)

The charity sector

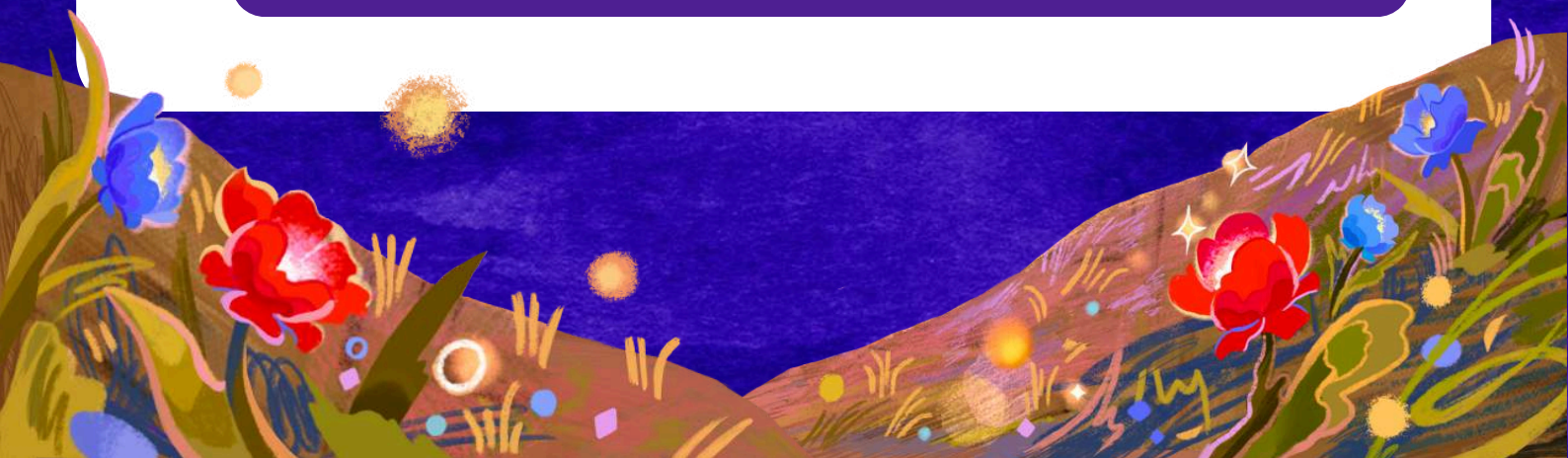
In the charity sector, lots of power sits with funders and institutions. There is an increasing desire to bring those with ‘lived experience’ — a **complex** concept — into the conversation. There are significant challenges faced by individuals in expert-by-experience roles, and important questions around power.

“Within the charity ecosystem, the critical friend sits on the margins, often in a smaller or more precarious organisation. The critical friend has less power (of course: otherwise they would be taking the advice and making the decisions). It is often the lone lived experience ‘voice’ in a room full of commissioners or service providers or professionals. As an individual, the critical friend is often someone from a marginalised or racialised community.” (Akiko Hart, **I am not your critical friend**, Charity So White)

Theoretical knowledge held by those in positions of power — such as policy makers or NHS Trusts — is often hierarchically prioritised and valued over the knowledge of those with lived experience of mental ill-health, ultimately upholding structures of power.

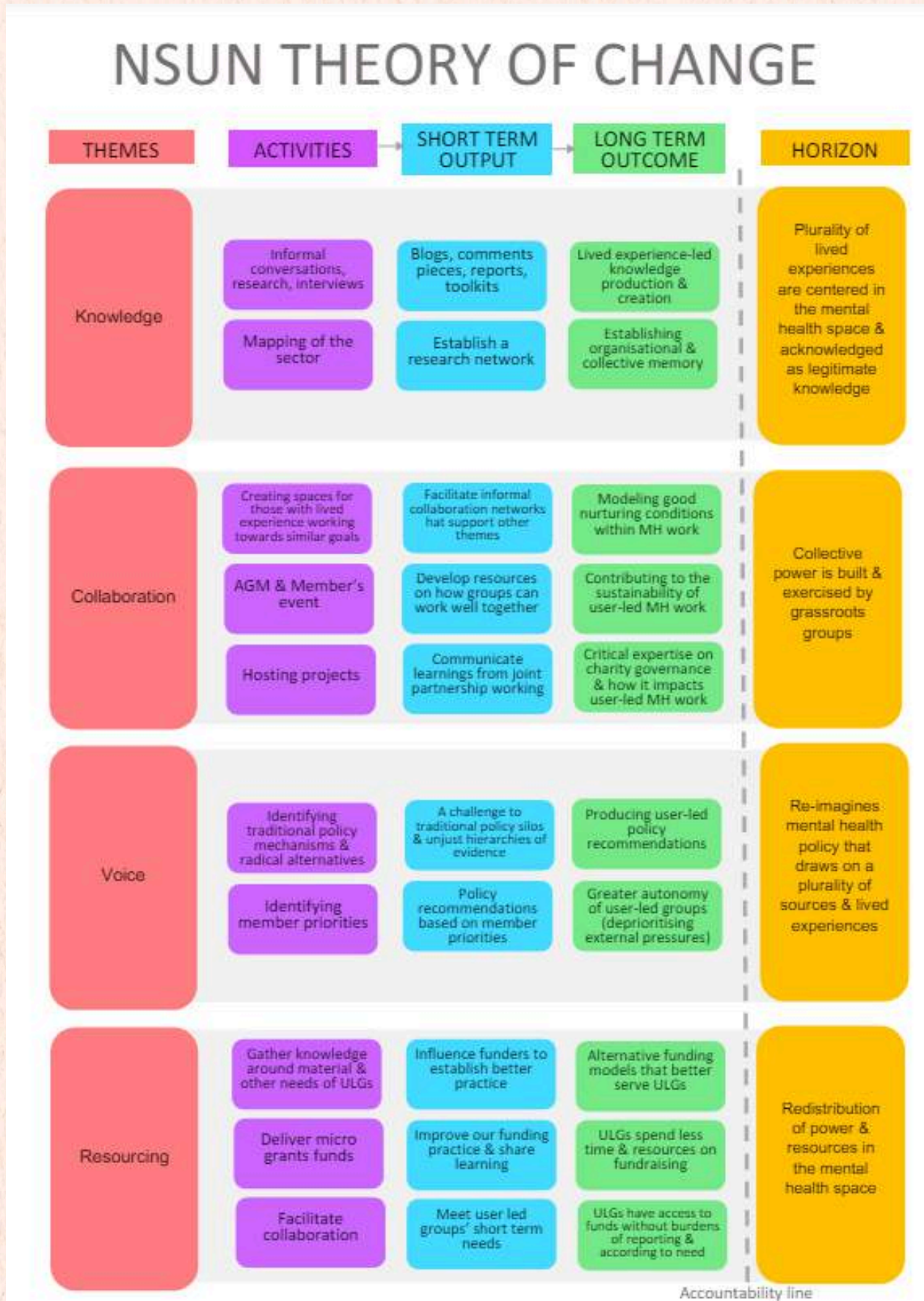
“Despite the difficulty of defining it, prioritising and advocating for people’s lived experience is important to disrupt power (im)balances and to challenge dominant understanding of whose voice matters and what forms of knowledge are seen as “legitimate”.” (Courtney Buckler, **Exploring "community" and the mental health lived experience landscape**, published by NSUN)

“What I’d most like to see, rather than simply sharing ownership or power, is mental health services, organisations, policy-makers and commissioners completely parting with power; giving resources and agency to groups of people with lived experience to create their own solutions and move beyond tinkering with the status quo. That could look like people and institutions with money and power giving that over in full to people with lived experience and user-led community groups who are working independently in ways that centre care, choice, dignity, social justice, and freedom from oppression and marginalisation.” (Amy Wells, **Co-production in mental health services**, NSUN)



NSUN'S THEORY OF CHANGE

In 2022, the staff team took time to reflect on the organisation's **strategic direction**: 'how we work, why we engage in this work, and the spaces we work in'. This was expressed as a Theory of Change document:



The capacity-building roles, activities and outputs described earlier in the report span all four themes of NSUN's work: knowledge, collaboration, voice and resourcing. Through diverse and constellated routes, capacity-focused efforts can help bring about the long-term outcomes NSUN has identified. Many of the outcomes above are reflected in member feedback describing the impact of NSUN's work.

NSUN will continue to learn from and with members as to how to best work with them to bring about change, and the sustainable shifting of power in the mental health space.

IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

The Members' Questionnaire and organisational learning

NSUN's Members' Questionnaire helps the team to understand the impacts of NSUN's work. The findings of the 2024 questionnaire, open from February 12th to March 11th, and receiving 215 responses, offer valuable insight into the nuanced impacts and outcomes of capacity-building approaches, from the perspective of members.

The feedback and ideas shared by members help sense-check in relation to NSUN's long-term outcomes and the horizon described in the Theory of Change, to better understand how this work can ultimately redistribute power in the mental health landscape.

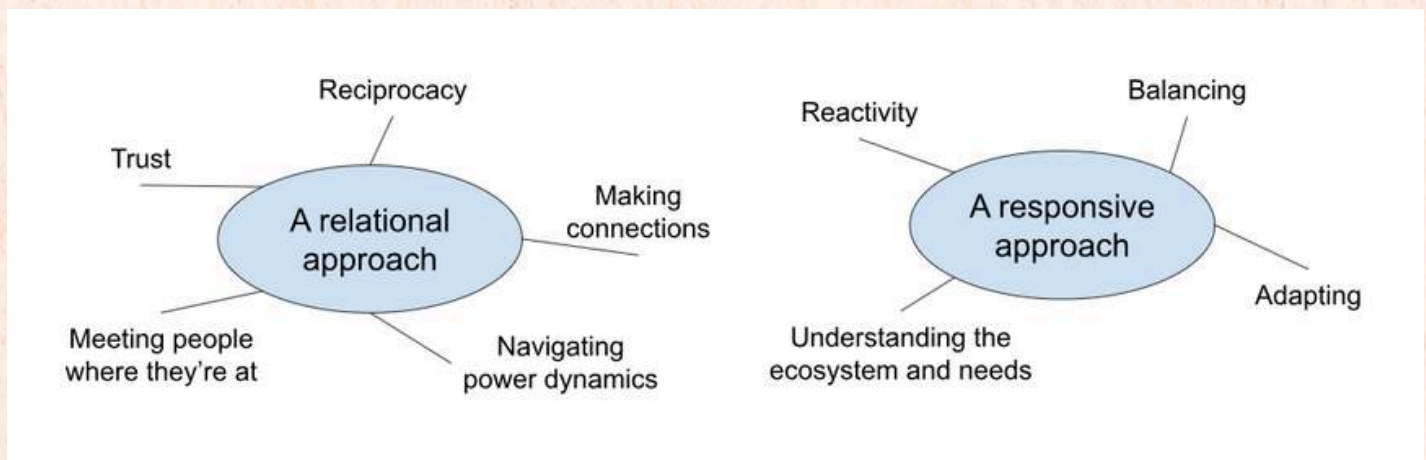
Some of the key areas we wanted to learn more about were how members like interacting with NSUN, responses to how the organisation is evolving, and different ideas about what NSUN should be doing more of or focusing on.

It is acknowledged that there are limitations to the questionnaire as a feed-in process, and that the scope and diversity of membership is not fully represented in responses and responders.



The impacts of approaches

NSUN's themes of work, and the capacity-building roles within them, can be a useful reference in thinking about how the activities and interactions described in feedback below fit into the broader picture of NSUN's strategic direction, and how capacity- and community-building impacts represented might connect to long-term outcomes and ecosystem-level shifts on the horizon. This can also help to contextualise and understand the relational and responsive approaches which underpin NSUN's roles.



Knowledge

Several of the key findings most relevant to impact were rooted in knowledge-sharing, particularly relating to NSUN communications and published resources.

Over three quarters of respondents (81.4%) had read, used or referred to NSUN resources or publications, and over three quarters (78.6%) had become aware of or connected to information, opportunities, or the wider community, as a result of communications and resources. Often this connection with information was a point-of-entry or mechanism for impact across other themes of work: for example, enabling relationships between groups (collaboration) or leading to a member securing paid work (resourcing financially.) One member expressed how NSUN's coordination and publishing of ecosystem knowledge helps *"build capacity & enthusiasm which I then pass on to our membership"*. - Members' Questionnaire respondent

In responses to how NSUN has helped sustain or resource groups, there was a shift from 2023's questionnaire results, where "awareness of opportunities" received the highest votes, to "access to resources like reports and toolkits" being most frequently selected (participants were able to select more than one answer).

Throughout questions, there were requests for more work to build knowledge across operational functions in groups, such as financial, legal, and training support.

"I often refer to Nsun 4pi involvement evaluation tool & often read the members articles & blogs. I have become involved in the campaign against the Serenity Integrated Mentoring (SIMs) as a result." — Members' Questionnaire respondent

"This is a fantastic site for resources through which I can stay connected to the pulse of our peer community" — Members' Questionnaire respondent

Collaboration

The results of the Members' Questionnaire were helpful in developing understanding of the impacts of NSUN's facilitation role, particularly outside of hosted projects. It was interesting to learn more about how the wider membership engages with the organisation. Terms such as "bringing together" were frequently used, referencing NSUN's role in facilitating connection.

The sense of community that members felt from the weekly bulletin in particular was referenced throughout responses to questions, described as giving a "precious, precious link" to the national community through the sharing of updates and opportunities. Connection to the network has helped facilitate relationships between groups: "I have made some great connections from the

network which has helped in connecting my own group I run". The monthly Network Meetings, launched in 2024, were also referenced as an opportunity to connect with the wider network and community.

Several respondents asked for more nationwide in-person opportunities for collaboration and connection, citing events that tend to be London-centric.

"The weekly bulletins make me feel connected to the mad community and other people with lived experience. Reading them helps me feel hopeful about the work that is going on." — Members' Questionnaire respondent

"I can often feel isolated with my mental health condition. Being part of NSUN reminds me that I'm part of something bigger - we're a movement working to make life better for all of us." — Members' Questionnaire respondent

"A portal that connects its readership/subscribers to real issues, real projects and real people. The weekly bulletins really keep me involved and aware of emergent issues and current projects" — Members' Questionnaire respondent

Voice

The impact of NSUN's policy and campaigns work, developed over the past year, was reflected in references to NSUN's work with Stop Oxevision, StopSIM and around the Mental Health Act.

Asked about overall feedback for NSUN, many responses spoke to the organisation's roles in amplifying voices from the network and community.

Members described being able to see and share user-led perspectives through NSUN as something that inspires hope and connection.

“Provides a user led perspective that I can’t access anywhere else”
— Members' Questionnaire respondent

“Knowing about all the user-led initiatives out there generally makes me feel more optimistic about the future of the mental health sphere.” - Members' Questionnaire respondent

“The survivor-led focus makes NSUN so different to other organisations which is what makes me interested in engaging with NSUN's work. it feels more aligned to my experiences than any other mental health charity/organisations” — Members' Questionnaire respondent

NSUN's role in lending influence, and the wider impact of the organisation's voice and policy work, were reflected in feedback.

One respondent described NSUN's “Highlighting and challenging inequality [and] position statements on contentious issues” as “helping to clarify my own thoughts, [and] understand what is happening with the wider service user led community”. — Members' Questionnaire respondent



“It defines our experience as valuable across medical, social, political and legal contexts, normalises payment . . . I appreciate NSUN's voice speaking out about injustices that affect us, whether it's the benefits system or things like SIM and other forms of criminalisation and punishment of mental distress.” — Members' Questionnaire respondent

There were many requests for NSUN to take an increased focus on campaigning work and support.

“The awareness from NSUN has inspired me to find my place in activism and campaigning.” — Members' Questionnaire respondent

Resourcing

Financial resourcing by way of grants, hosting projects, connections to paid work, and links to funding opportunities, were all referenced as ways in which NSUN had supported members in sustaining their work.

Some respondents described the impact that funding had for their group. It is interesting to note that the last round of funding was in 2022, reflecting the knock-on effects of small grants, and grantees' continued engagement with NSUN. It is, of course, difficult to track these ripple-effect impacts in a more specific way.

Responses highlighted the hope for continued provision and development of financial resourcing.



“We had our first ever funding with NSUN during covid and it gave us the kickstart we needed from 2 users working together in May 2020 to 51 users today”. — Members' Questionnaire respondent

“The funding they provided us with really helped us build capacity and deliver the work we wanted whilst paying people fairly” — Members' Questionnaire respondent



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.

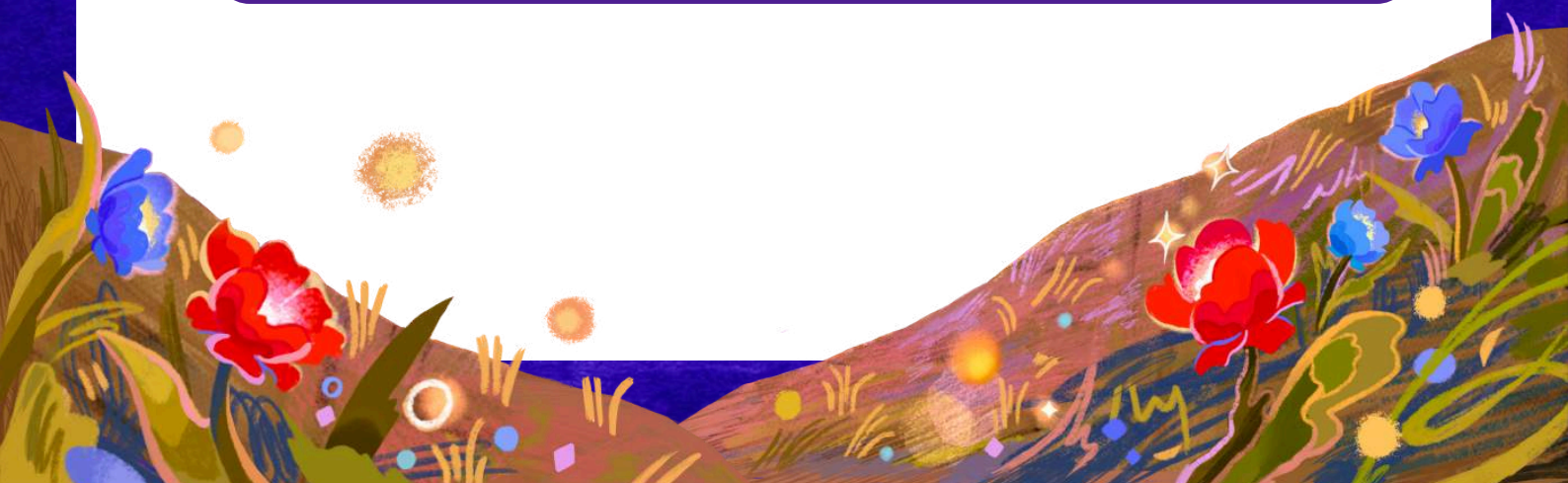
Reliability

Some of the reliability of NSUN's offer was attributed to the organisation's cultural approach to work, where teams work very collaboratively and relationships, where possible, are with the organisation as a whole, rather than a particular individual. Nurturing trust in the organisation, then, helps safeguard the reliability of support if a staff member is unavailable.

It was acknowledged that, due to differing roles and responsibilities, initially relationships and rapport tended to be more with an individual, with this extending more to the wider organisation over time.

Reliability was often related back to sustainability. Learning and experimentation — figuring out what does and doesn't work — were noted as having helped enable NSUN to deliver in a sustainable way.

“They're on top of everything, which is really useful because it helps keep momentum.” — Interviewee



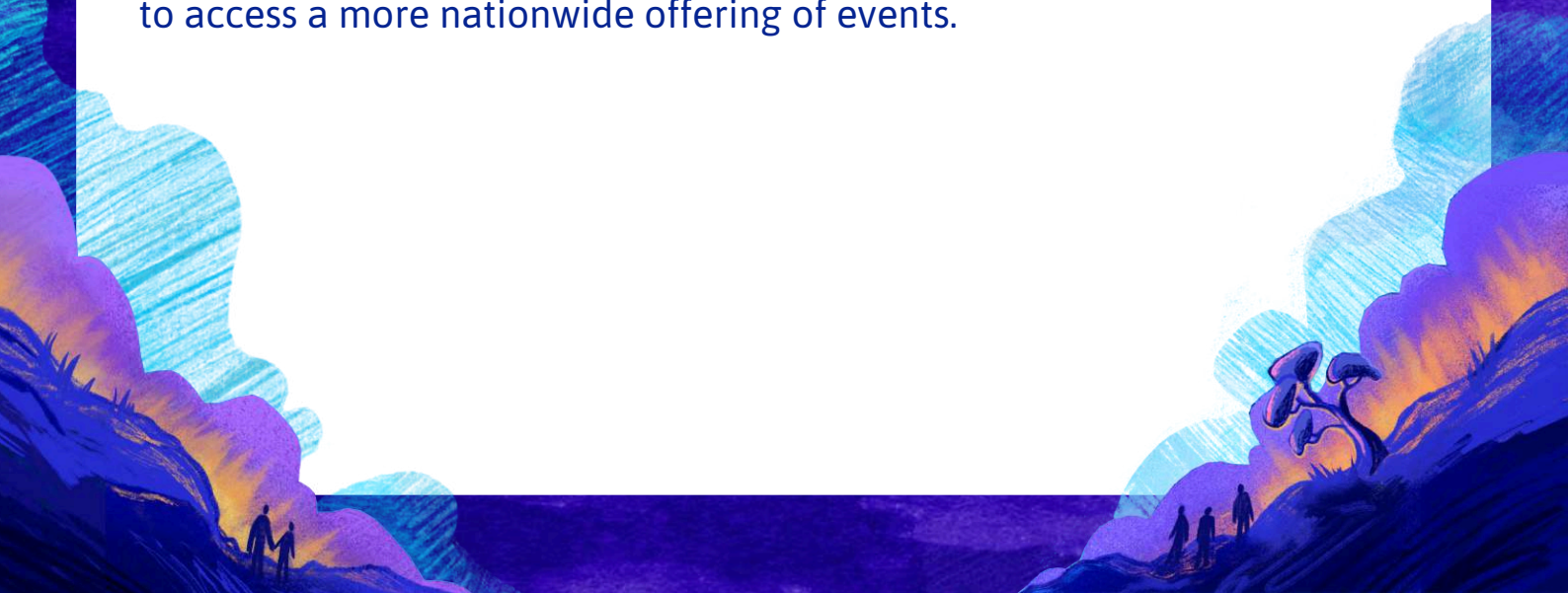
In the 2024 Members' Questionnaire, appreciation for a reliable flow of information — particularly via the weekly bulletin — was reflected in feedback, supporting members to keep “connected”, “up-to-date”, and “informed” about the user-led community and wider mental health landscape. One respondent recounted how they “rely on the weekly bulletin to learn about others' work” and be connected to opportunities. NSUN's publications were described as “credible and reliable”.

Accessibility

Accessibility was related to responsiveness: an NSUN staff member noted, “the only way we can be truly accessible is working based on an understanding that every group and member has different needs, being responsive to that.” It was recognised that this takes more capacity, time and resource to provide.

Access was considered when developing policy. For example, for participation payments, an alternative to bank transfer, letter of thanks, and support navigating DWP and HMRC procedures, are all offered to help remove some of the barriers for participation.

In the Members' Questionnaire, a range of perspectives around the accessibility of NSUN events were shared. Some members welcomed the accessibility of virtual spaces, whilst others highlighted the drawbacks, and demonstrated a preference for a more hybrid offer of virtual and in-person. Some respondents felt that in-person opportunities shared tended to be London-centric, limiting ability to attend, and would be better able to access a more nationwide offering of events.



Fairness

Balancing fairness with practical parameters around resourcing was discussed. “The tendency is to fund work on our radar. We don’t have enough money to put a call out to everyone, so there’s a natural risk we’ll fund groups we’re already working with.” — NSUN staff member

Decision-making also felt relevant to fairness. When naturally not everything can be funded, one aspect of decision-making has been focusing on areas which are exciting to the team and enable NSUN to deliver work in the best way possible.

The balance of fairness and NSUN’s identity, voice, and boundaries, was also discussed. It was acknowledged that NSUN navigates spaces where certain viewpoints may be more or less well received and that the membership includes a broad variety of perspectives. The example was given of a resistance from many in the survivor movement, “for very good reason”, to personality disorder diagnosis. “If there was a group that wanted to be an NSUN member and campaign for better diagnosis, would that be allowed?” - Interviewee

“It’s interesting to make explicit those boundaries. But how do you communicate in ways that are appropriate? Does [NSUN] need those boundaries?” — Interviewee



Transparency

Transparency was often related to communication, particularly around expectation management and limitations to what NSUN can offer.

As capacity is going to impact what both the organisation, and an individual, is able to deliver — as well as potentially having a knock-on effect on, for example, reliability — some staff members expressed that it might be helpful to be even more transparent with groups, as well as each other, about individual capacity.


How transparency related to power dynamics as a member was considered. “Someone’s got money they could potentially give you . . . there’s a weird power dynamic. You don’t really know who’s making the decisions, and how those decisions are made... I think there’s something in de-mystifying that process.” — Interviewee

APPROACHING WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Familiar faces

It was acknowledged that NSUN has a tendency to form closer, longer-term working relationships — often spanning multiple projects — with a smaller number of groups. These relationships were described as overwhelmingly positive and beneficial: members who worked more closely with NSUN felt that the organisation worked well with and for them.






“So much of the learning that we've done has come from those really intense one-to-one relationships.” — NSUN staff member

Some interviewees started to think about why some groups felt more ‘connected’ — “is it because we’re the most willing to engage [with NSUN?]” It was also suggested that, by nature of being a small organisation with limited resource, what is supported can sometimes be based on what staff members are particularly aligned with. Pre-existing relationships and mutual understanding also better enable either side to approach the other with an idea for collaboration or support.

At the same time, it seemed front of mind that these circumstances can also easily lend themselves to ‘clique-iness’, which felt at odds with fairness.

NSUN learning who’s out there

We wondered how we might go about making connections with groups not currently known, or known well, to the organisation.



“How do we take stock of where we're reaching and where we're not? I wonder if there is something about taking the time to map out those connections that we have and paying attention not just to who's there, but who's not there. Obviously, it's a lot harder to figure out who you're not in contact with. Something about ways that we can slow down and take stock of our networks and think about how to be strategic.” — NSUN staff member

Groups learning what NSUN can offer

We thought about how groups — including members — might come to know about what NSUN can do.

“Is NSUN open for anybody to pitch them to host a campaign? Do people know that NSUN will in fact host a campaign?” — Interviewee

Part of this process includes learning what might be helpful for groups to be able to find out about NSUN’s offer, and testing how to communicate around this: there is now a page on the website where groups can specifically **ask for campaign support**.

These conversations often came back round to capacity and not wanting to overpromise, so that support could be sustainable and reliable. NSUN, of course, has finite capacity and resource itself, including to respond to an open inbox. There was a hesitancy around advertising more widely what the organisation can potentially do, as this might lead to an influx of requests that can’t all be responded to as those reaching out had hoped.

There were other considerations around raising the profile of support, such as — in wishing to be transparent — detailing a grant given to a campaign group, where this could be misunderstood as meaning they are fully funded, and not doing difficult unpaid work.

Not advertising NSUN’s capacity-building methods more widely, though, means potentially reducing the chance of being approached by groups or campaigns who NSUN do not currently have a relationship with, and in turn the accessibility of support.

Though there was a natural inclination to initiate and nurture relationships with a wider range of groups, there is a need for this to be balanced with current internal capacity.

Managing internal capacity

NSUN's own capacity needs to be manageable for the organisation to be in a position to give relationships the time needed to build trust and rapport. As a relatively small organisation, NSUN is not invulnerable to becoming overstretched for a variety of reasons, and proactively managing this felt important.

It was recognised that a careful, considered approach to work inherently takes much more time. Reflective conversations help formulate and navigate thoughtful, care-centred approaches to relationships.

Decision making is similarly values-led and considered: for example, in bringing together the bulletin, even with guidelines, "every submission brings on a bigger question about [how we work]." There is a need to ensure "we don't get in a position where we're so focused on delivering there's no time to think things through." - NSUN staff member

Making processes work better for hosted projects and members, though time-intensive, feels worthwhile, and saves them a lot of time and energy.

"We've made sure our finance reporting processes are as minimal as they can be and mirror trust in a way that larger funders don't. So there's been a lot of reflections on what are the hard lines of the regulations we have to follow, and how we meet those without passing those onto the groups. [For example] developing a well thought-through participation policy, and being very boundaried in making sure we're always paying for participation, and not using people's time and being extractive." — NSUN staff member

What NSUN isn't

It at times felt tricky acknowledging limitations to the amount or kind of support which can be offered to members.

Sometimes this was when the nature of the support needed relates to something NSUN isn't placed to directly provide — for example, members reaching out over the phone when experiencing distress. Other times, it was considering the parameters and long-term consequences of hosting arrangements, where there was a significant likelihood a hosted group could be negatively impacted further down the line, and therefore having to decline a request.

Care is taken by all teams, especially in comms and policy, not to over-promise. There was a suggestion to further explore clarity around what is and isn't possible, to avoid inadvertently positioning the organisation in a way that makes it seem helpful in ways it's not able to be.

“What groups need time and time again is financial resource, which is always going to be a limiting factor in what we can provide.” — NSUN staff member

Multiplicity of voices

Approaching capacity building where the individuals and groups that occupy these spaces represent a diverse array of experiences, opinions, needs and truths, was another theme that ran through our exploration of the questions.



“I think there's a sense of NSUN as a membership organisation being pulled between various different voices within its membership, and not necessarily having a coherent voice of its own.” — NSUN staff member

“Someone will send something in [for the bulletin], and it might not be the language we'd use, or how we'd position this, but we know that lots of our membership will be interested . . . but for however many are interested, another will question why we include this. You can't speak to 5000 people at the same time and provide them all with what they need.” — NSUN staff member

It was acknowledged that in choosing what to, for example, put out on the website, there was always inherently an element of opting to give space to one issue or voice rather than another.

From reflection to learning

Relational working and organisational values help provide a centre of gravity for how work is approached, and a foundation of principles by which ideas and decisions can be sense-checked.

These reflective ways of working enable learning and change within NSUN. There is a need, however, for tools and frameworks that can capture and implement this learning and development, and acknowledge the breadth of NSUN's work.



FRAMEWORKS FOR LEARNING

As part of this learning work, we set out to better understand and articulate NSUN's approach to learning, developing flexible frameworks for monitoring, evaluating, and learning from approaches to capacity-building.

We discussed how learning happens within the organisation, what felt most important to build into frameworks, and how the process can shift power to members. Actioning and experimenting with the methodology itself felt aligned with the way NSUN approaches learning, identifying what to try whilst continuing to develop frameworks.

In simple form, we can think of monitoring as the collecting and recording of information relevant to work and impact, and evaluation as reflecting on information and experiences to understand and describe impact, and develop approaches.

A learning framework outlines principles and processes for learning in a more systematic way. Mapping out methodology and thinking around learning can support the continued development of approaches, keep learning sustainable, and assist organisational memory.



HOW LEARNING HAPPENS WITHIN NSUN

Key ideas:

- 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

'Informal' methods/mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and learning:

- 'Live' within a space (e.g. Network Meetings)
- Prompted by inbox (feedback, asks, queries) or social media feed (member priorities, emerging areas of interest) > collected in document
- Informal, continuous conversations between staff team > worked through based on NSUN knowledge learned with and from members over time
- Informal, continuous conversations with members > reflections and evolution of offer
- Noticing who we haven't heard from and implications (e.g., need to adjust approach to outreach, considerations around 'missing' voices' capacity or opportunity to engage)

'Formal' methods/mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and learning:

- Members' Questionnaire > analysed, report put together and circulated, informs thinking around agenda set by team
- Formal meetings where team decide processes > decisions informed by experience of learning with members
- Data collection around engagement > informally reviewed
- Supporter newsletter > data captured on sheet
- Event feedback surveys > shared with teams involved
- Staff survey > managers look through and figure out action points
- Narrative records of supporting member campaigns > logged along with reflections on impact and how to develop support offer
- Supporting a user-led group in a learning process > we learn alongside them

This approach to learning and change felt relevant to how user-led groups work, too. Even if groups aren't utilising more 'formal', systematic methods of monitoring and evaluating, it's likely that reflective conversations are happening and leading to change.

ARTICULATING OUR APPROACH

Key principles:

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.

Key strategies:

→ *Continuous learning*

Our framework reflects that we are continuously engaged in monitoring, evaluation and learning, and captures informal and less tangible change

- E.g. recognising and responding to an advancing member priority that has been informally communicated through social media feeds
- E.g. reflecting on which voices and perspectives are missing in a conversation, and renewing approaches to outreach and relationship-building

→ *Convening*

We make space to convene and collaborate to integrate learning, reflecting on this continuous process, and developing the methodology

- E.g. staff and members involved in delivering an event meet to share ideas on how to respond to feedback, and document learnings for organisational memory
- E.g. members of a user-led group and staff participate in an evaluative conversation, discussing experiences of change so far, and adjusting approaches
- E.g. in an all-staff meeting, we reflect on learning and change from recent, diverse projects, and how learning can be shared with — and shift power to — our membership

→ **Communicating**

We want to articulate and communicate about learning and change, creating room for conversation and collective learning

- E.g. in ongoing conversation with a hosted project, we proactively and transparently communicate our response to feedback and ideas, including what we can't do
- E.g. in a blog post published on the website, we share learnings around a recent piece of work in partnership with a user-led group, to build knowledge in the sector

DEVELOPING FLEXIBLE FRAMEWORKS

How are we developing flexible frameworks to monitor, evaluate, and learn from our approaches?

We want to try: dedicated spaces to share and reflect on learning together

To better sustain and support learning, we identified that it could be useful to create more opportunities to collaborate and be intentional about figuring out and integrating learning and change. We want to think critically about our methodology as an evolving practice.

This will support us to find connections, share knowledge, holistically integrate change, and document for organisational memory.

Questions we want to consider are: When might it be useful to convene around learning? What questions should we ask ourselves in this space? How can we account for less tangible, but meaningful, change?

We want to try: thinking more about how we communicate learning and change

We want to work out how to articulate and communicate about learning and change, supporting collective learning and deepening connections with our membership.

Questions we want to consider are: Who might this learning also be relevant for? How do we acknowledge and respond to what we can't act on now? How do we ensure we are not gatekeepers of knowledge?

We want to try: different ways of ensuring learning activities are equitable

There is a need to balance the shifting of power to members, through meaningful participation in learning spaces and evaluation, with considerate asks for labour and time. Though collaboration will look different across projects, the process should always be mutually beneficial and equitable.

In some pieces of work, for example, it might be helpful for the staff team to prepare some ideas in advance of meeting with members, to best utilise shared time. Financial compensation could be offered for participating in evaluation.

Questions we want to consider are: How can we support members to identify what they want to learn? How do we collaboratively develop an approach to monitoring and evaluation? How does this activity benefit, and ultimately shift power to, members?



CONCLUSION

LEARNINGS

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, operations)?

- Diverse work that ‘supports a user-led group’s means to sustainably function’ can be described as capacity-building. Such activities span all four themes of NSUN’s work as articulated in the organisation’s strategic direction — knowledge, collaboration, voice and resourcing — and are held both in and out of the Community Constellations programme.
- NSUN sustains an elasticity in responding to need, and as such takes on varied functions and roles, including facilitating, hosting, resourcing financially, influencing, amplifying, and knowledge sharing.

What approaches does NSUN use, and what impacts have these approaches had?

- A relational approach to work centres trust, reciprocity, making connections, meeting people where they’re at, and acknowledging power dynamics.
- A responsive approach has been built on balancing, adapting, reactivity, and understanding the mental health ecosystem/needs.
- Members highlight how being connected to information and opportunities helps to sustain and resource their groups. Facilitating members’ connection to the wider user-led movement is valued as a way of building community and collective knowledge.
- Policy and campaigns work connects members with user-led perspectives and initiatives relevant to their experiences, and amplifies voices from the community.

- Resourcing groups financially supports them to build capacity and deliver sustainably.

How can this work shift power in the sector?

- Thought is given to how power and resource — from grants to knowledge — flow through the organisation. There is an awareness of the importance of avoiding becoming inadvertent gatekeepers, or speaking on anyone's behalf.
- Work to redistribute power and resource in the mental health space involves recognising and challenging dynamics which uphold structures of power.
- Shifts towards many of the long-term outcomes NSUN has articulated are reflected, on an individual or user-led group level, in member feedback describing the impacts of capacity-building work.

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?

- Reliability was attributed to NSUN's approach to work, where teams work very collaboratively, and time is taken to foster trust in the organisation and team as a whole. It was also related back to practices around how the organisation can work sustainably.
- Accessibility was related to responsiveness, understanding that members have different support needs. It was recognised that this approach takes more time, capacity and resource to provide. There was a focus on removing barriers to engagement or accessing resource.
- Some of the concepts that felt most relevant to fairness were internal capacity and decision-making. Both involved balancing

responding to diverse priorities, with having finite resource and the need at times to narrow focus. There was balance to be found in nurturing longer-term relationships and collaborations with specific member groups and individuals, and making new connections. Navigating relationships with a membership with a multiplicity of perspectives was also explored.

- Transparency was often related to communication, particularly around what can or can't be offered by way of support. We also discussed transparency around decision-making, and how this affects relationship dynamics.

How can NSUN develop a flexible framework for learning from, monitoring and improving these approaches?

- We discussed how learning happens within NSUN, what felt most important to build into frameworks, and how the process can shift power to members. Actioning and experimenting with the methodology itself felt aligned with the way NSUN approaches learning.
- We reflected that learning and change happen continuously, often organically outside of structured processes, and in lots of different ways. Relational and responsive approaches have helped create the right conditions for learning and change working in this way.
- Learning should be meaningfully participatory and collaborative, mutually beneficial, and ultimately shift power to members.
- We outlined ideas to try relating to key strategies of being continuously engaged in learning, convening to reflect on learning, and communicating about learning and change.

As we continue to learn and develop our approach, we welcome feedback, questions and ideas. You can reach us at info@nsun.org.uk.

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