

Relationship Makers Impact Review

Supporting a cohort of
Community Businesses

What happened?

What
went
well?

What did
we learn?

The Relationships Project

At [The Relationships Project](#) we believe that everything works better when relationships are valued; people are happier and healthier, and businesses and services are more effective and efficient. That's why it's our mission is to make it easier for every organisation, service and individual to put relationships at the heart of what they do.

Acknowledgements

A big thank you to our wonderful cohort of Relationship Makers who came on this journey with us and to Beth Sparasci from [Coop UK](#), and to Bonnie Hewson and all at [Power to Change](#) for making it happen.

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1.

Setting the Context

Why Relationships?

Why Community Businesses?

Why now?

From first touching elbows instead of shaking hands, through to full on lockdown and a second phase bringing tiers and tears, 2020 has definitely been a different kind of year. Some of us have suffered loss. Many have been seriously ill. Most of us have been anxious and uncertain. All of us have been separated from ones we love. These are life changing experiences, shared by us all.

At the heart of all of this is how we are in relationship with ourselves, each other, and the communities we are part of. **Connection has never been more important.** Whilst local authorities have endeavored to reconfigure services to meet new needs, much of the immediate, emergency response particularly in the opening weeks of lockdown came from informal mutual aid. And in many areas, this was cultivated by Community Businesses.

In fact, the most comprehensive and successful social responses have been highly collaborative and **the best collaborations have emerged in areas where there were pre-existing structures and relationships.** Growing the connective tissue takes time and is difficult to do well mid-crisis. Community Businesses have been at the heart of this; organisations that already play a role in many people's lives have continued to be a pillar of strength and connection.

This workshop series provided Community Businesses up and down the country with a chance to take stock of the past months, learn new tools and build deep connections with one another to share how they are navigating this crisis. Through this, **each organisation has been able to deepen how they are using relationships in their work** - relationships that continue to have life-changing impact not just through Covid, but far into the future.

– Kate Weiler and Immy Robinson
Workshop Facilitator and Programme Lead

2.

What Happened?

In Numbers: Figures and Attendance

9 participants from **7** community businesses
got to know each other through **1** taster session,
4 workshops and **1** feedback session over **8**
weeks, completing **2** Action Learning Sets
and collaboratively drawing **1** dinosaur
(which was epic)



Programme Overview

Relationship Makers Workshop Series



Recruitment

Recruitment took longer than we had initially expected, and we learnt a lot through the process.

We began by having a workshop and individual calls with Catalysts. During these calls we collaboratively designed the programme and framed the 'pitch' to Community Businesses. Catalysts pushed us hard to be really specific about what we were doing and what participants would get out of it. Articulating the value of a peer learning programme focused on relationships can be challenging, but with the help of the group we got somewhere close!

Using a one-pager we put together, Catalysts invited Community Businesses to take part in the programme. Some Catalysts targeted specific Community Businesses they thought would be interested and others issued an open invitation.

We then held a 'taster' session and had one-to-one calls with interested community businesses to whet their appetites and give them a bit more info about what we'd be doing.

Workshop 1 Mapping Relationships Thursday 24th September 2:00 - 3:30pm	Workshop 2 Getting Inspired Thursday 8th October 2:00 - 3:30pm
Workshop 3 Identifying Priorities Thursday 22nd October 2:00 - 3:30pm	Workshop 4 Taking Action Thursday 5th November 2:00 - 3:30pm

Key dates for the programme

Welcome Pack

Each participant was sent a welcome pack of goodies in the post to help them feel part of the community and excited to get going. We included a lovely notebook, some Relationship Project resources and a handwritten note from our two Hosts, Immy and Kate.

In this virtual world, it's even more important to cultivate moments of connection outside of a screen. Everyone fed back how much they appreciated this, and we loved putting them together!

Taster session

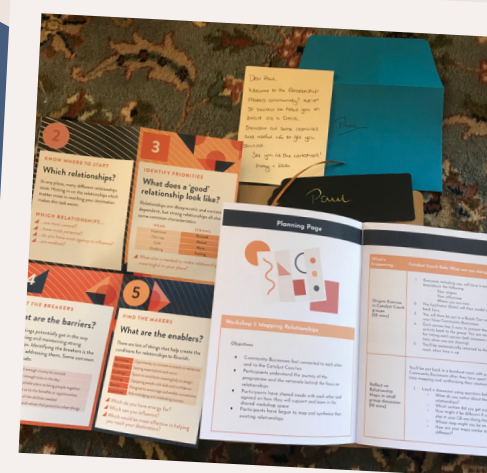
Signing up to an eight week programme is a big commitment - particularly in the midst of a pandemic. To help prospective participants decide whether this programme was something for them, we ran a 60 minute taster session where we shared a bit more about the series and gave a sense of how it would feel to take part in the workshops.

During the session, we used an abridged version of our [Spirit of Lockdown Storybook](#) which gave participants the chance - and a framework - to reflect on their experiences of Covid and the effect it has had on their relationships. We've done this with a number of groups now and have been told by many that it's a cathartic sense-making opportunity in a time of confusion and chaos.

Everyone who came along to the taster session signed up to the programme and we shared the recording of the session with others who were interested in attending, which resulted in a few more sign ups.

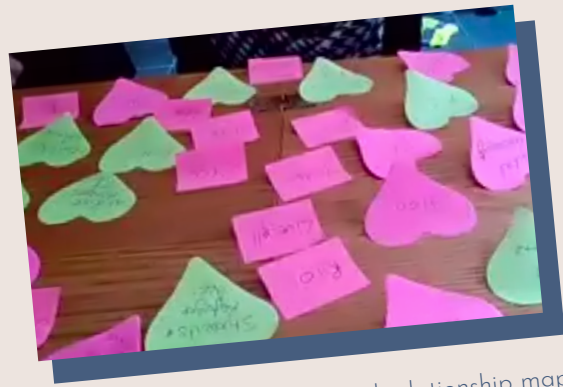


Spirit of Lockdown Storybook tool



"Getting something in the post was such a nice touch - I loved that..."

– Workshop Participant



One Community Business, mid-relationship map

What we did

- **Got to know each other as human beings**
A round of introductions where we shared a bit about our origins, our influences, and what's currently going on for us...
- **Created our own relationships maps**
Listing and clustering the relationships we have within our organisations in a way that made sense for us. We drew inspiration from permaculture, systems thinking and social support.
- **Reflected on the role that relationships play in our organisations**
Drawing out observations and common themes in our maps to articulate why relationships are important to what we do.
- **Kept the conversation going**
Each participant was invited to have one conversation with someone in their business about relationships, before we next met as a group.

Workshop 1: Mapping Relationships

Ideas for next time....

- What might different versions of the mapping look like if different people in the organisation completed it? Could this be a useful starting point for an internal conversation?
- How could we help participants to digitise their maps so they are sharable and durable?
- How could we explore the link between impact and relationships even more explicitly within the first session?

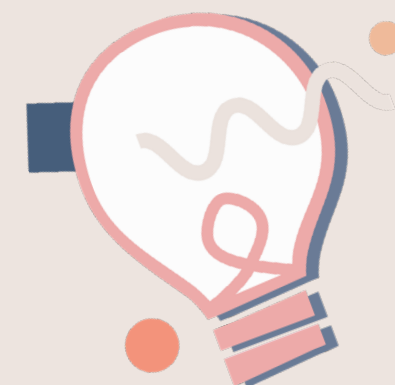


What we did

- **Checked in on how we were doing**
We took our time saying hello, continuing to get to know one another on a deeper level.
- **Got inspired by what others are doing**
We used The Relationship Project's [Case Study Cards](#) to find inspiration from organisations placing relationships at the heart of what they do, and how it is having impact.
- **Reflected on what we could do in our own organisations**
We thought about what, from the case studies, we could adapt and test in our own organisations and communities.



Workshop 2: Getting Inspired



Ideas for next time....

- Invite guest speakers to talk about the role that relationships play in their organisation and how they design the conditions for them to flourish.

What we did

- **A little bit of homework**

Pre-session, we created our own Relationship Heatmaps using The Relationships Project's [new diagnostic tool](#), which enabled each participant to find the warm and cool spots in their relational practice.

- **Reflected on our Heatmap results**

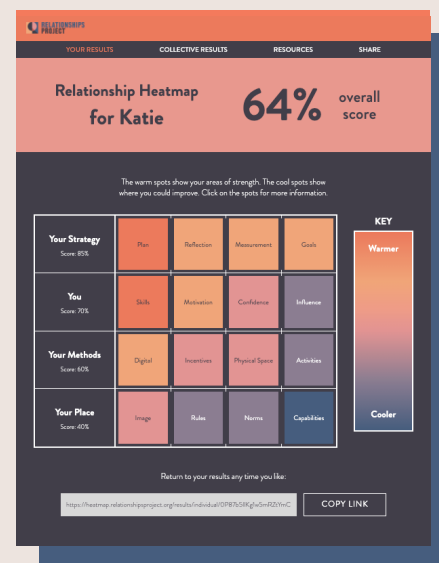
We explored our individual Heatmaps, digging into areas that were working well (warm spots) and areas that we could focus more on (cool spots).

- **Collectively coached one member of the group**

Through an Action Learning Set, led by the workshop facilitator, we helped one member of the group to problem-solve a cool spot identified in their Heatmap.

- **Identified actions we could take**

We all identified a practical action that we could take back to our organisation that help to improve our relationships.



Workshop 3: Identifying Priorities

Ideas for next time...

- Build in a buddying model which partners participants up to provide an even deeper level of peer support, 1:1 coaching and connection.

What we did

- **Continued to cement our bond**

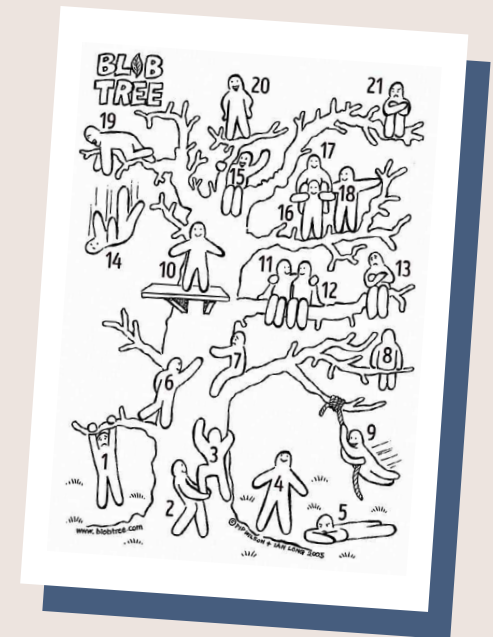
Had a bit of a giggle by checking in using the [Blob Tree](#) and once again checked in with each other as human beings.

- **Consolidated our key learnings**

We looked back over the series and built on our reflections and insights across the programme to develop the actions we're going to take forward to strengthen our relational practice.

- **Showed our appreciation for one another**

We shared some thanks for the support provided to one another through the programme in an extended check out.



Workshop 4: Taking Action

Ideas for next time...

- Close out the final session with a 'legacy' activity which helps to consolidate learning and sustain momentum.
- What can we do to encourage these new supportive relationships to continue?



3.

What went well?

"I'd like to think eventually Tanya and Dave [two fellow participants] will come down to visit us and we will greet them like long lost friends with forbidden hugs..."

– Workshop Participant

A friendly, warm group where new connections really flourished

It was a genuine pleasure to participate in the workshops, a sentiment that was shared by the whole group. Having a warm, welcoming space dedicated to reflecting and supporting one another was made all the more welcome amongst the uncertainty and exhaustion wrought by Covid. The dedicated time and space for discussion and sensemaking offered something of a **balm to chaos** many of us were feeling outside of our sessions.

We built a trusting community from day one, by taking time to do extended introductions to get to know each other. We also started each session with a check in, where we could share how we were doing personally as well as professionally. **Each session was full of laughter, support and care for one another.**

A blend of activities and discussion which helped inspire action

Each session was informal and relaxed in its tone, but with a clear structured approach to activities.

Each workshop focused on using a particular resource or tool from the [Relationships Makers' Toolbox](#), supporting Community Businesses to harness data and insights from the work they do.

We also included a range of types of participatory approaches, from whole group discussions, to small group reflections, to one to one connection moments.

A peer learning approach which provided practical - as well as emotional - support

Community Businesses know how to 'do' relationships well - it's their bread and butter. **What they often miss out on is time and space to really reflect** on how they are harnessing relationships in their work, how they can talk about and advocate this sort of work, and to consider where they may be able to increase the depth of their impact. The workshops gave a protected, neutral space for this, away from the day to day challenges of their work, and in a community of like-minded, supportive individuals.

The peer learning approach meant that no one person or perspective was privileged as 'the expert', but rather the emphasis was on the collective wisdom among a group of people working in their own communities. We shared stories, offered practical tips, and coached one another when considering challenging situations.

A focus on the conditions that enable relationships to flourish

Whilst the focus of the programme was on relationships, it gave participants space to identify actions relating to a wide range of business matters, from their approach to monitoring and evaluation through to their business strategy and their external communications. These are all conditions or factors which, when done well, can enable better relationships to form and flourish, which in turn drive better outcomes for Community Businesses.

The use of the Heatmap in particular helped Community Businesses to pinpoint areas of their strategy and approach which could be strengthened to the benefit of both their relationships with their community and their business as a whole.

"Being in this space has solidified how crucial relationships are - it's affirmed how much can change if you have good relationships."

– Workshop Participant

"When I signed up I was thinking about working with Community Businesses, but actually it's affected every aspect of my work..."

– Workshop Participant

"Action Learning was absolutely phenomenal... it gave me that kick up the backside to make plans - pushing things forward. I really liked that the process was that I was trying to find out answers for myself."

– Workshop Participant

"Sometimes I dread those ice breakers, but the reason the programme has been so successful is because of that trust... people have got to know each other quickly which is rare on Zoom."

– Workshop Participant

"I found the programme really useful just to connect with other people - you get to look at the same thing from different perspectives."

– Workshop Participant

"You don't always see the obvious. Our organisation does so much but the Heatmap showed us we don't really promote it as best we could... this work will have a knock on effect."

– Workshop Participant

4.

What did we learn?

Modelling good relationship building set the tone and was an important part of the learning

A number of participants remarked on the value they derived from the modelling of good relationships by the programme delivery team. From friendly, handwritten welcome letters to warm, fun check-ins, we did our best to practice what we preach. We believe there were a few key ingredients here:

- Delivery by an experienced facilitator who has a warm delivery style and helped the Community Businesses to feel at ease with each other and through the process.
- Establishing an informal tone whilst ensuring a clear structure to each workshop and the overall process.
- Prioritising the connections between participants by; taking time at the start to really get to know each other, having a relatively small group where everyone's voices could be heard, starting and ending each session with a check in and check out, sending a welcome pack in the post before the workshops started.

Neutral, reflective learning spaces are particularly important in a pandemic

At the outset of this programme, we were apprehensive about running a multi-session programme in the middle of a pandemic, which was already increasing workloads multifold and causing acute Zoom fatigue. Whilst we experienced a few such concerns during the recruitment phase, we learned through the programme that providing warm, neutral reflective learning spaces for collaborative sensemaking is all the more important in the midst of crisis.

The workshops were externally facilitated by someone who was not linked to further funding for their community businesses, which meant there was no ulterior motive or conflict of interest that could have affected what Community Businesses chose to share. The neutrality was also born out of the emphasis on learning, on reflection and the power of peers.

Participating with someone else from your organisation helps deepen learning

Some participants came along to the programme as a sole representative of their community business, whilst others attended with a colleague or two. Whilst all participants told us they found the programme practical, thought provoking and stimulating, we saw moments of really powerful conversation and action planning between members of the same business.

For future programmes, we'll encourage multiple people from the same organisation to participate to bring this extra layer of energy and commitment.

The content of the workshops was useful for both community businesses and Catalysts

We set off on this journey thinking there were two groups of participants, each of whom would get something different from participating in the programme:

- Community businesses who would learn about how to strengthen their relationships with their community
- Catalysts who would act as coaches through the programme and, in doing so, develop their mentoring and facilitation skills

Whilst both of these outcomes were felt, what we saw was that there was little distinction between Coaches and Businesses in terms of how they were involved in sessions, and that the content of the sessions had value for Coaches in their work too.

In fact, the sharing of experiences across these two groups added a richness to the conversations and helped to build empathy and understanding. This has inspired us to seek opportunities to trial a multidisciplinary peer learning programme that brings together participants from different parts of a system or sector.

"We're all brilliant at talking but sometimes the talking finishes and then you're a bit vague on the stuff you've got to do. Specific actionable things and a little bit of [group] accountability is so helpful."

– Workshop Participant

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Opportunities to build on this work

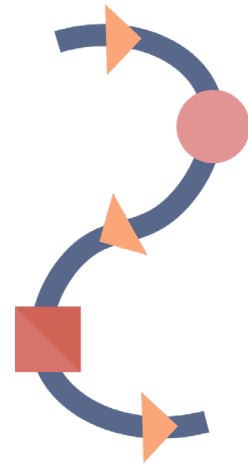
"If there was another Relationship Makers project, I would definitely put it at the top of my list because it is so immensely useful as an overall structure - to sit down and buy yourself time to think."

– Workshop Participant

With this cohort

Provide continued moments of connection

Through this programme, we've seen strong and nurturing connections develop between participants and would love to help these connections grow by hosting regular Action Learning Sets for this cohort. This would allow the group to get together at regular intervals to continue to support and coach one another, and build in additional accountability for continuing the work we've started.



Train the trainer

We'd love to leverage the energy and passion of this group has for working in relational ways by training them to deliver similar programmes for their networks and beyond. This would enable us develop a network of Relationship Project Associates who help us to scale up and advocate for the power of relationships.

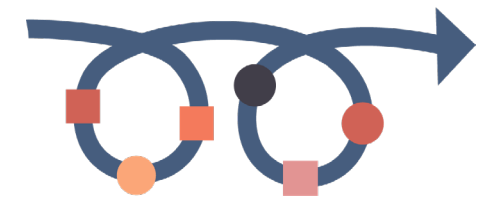


With new cohorts...

Run the programme again

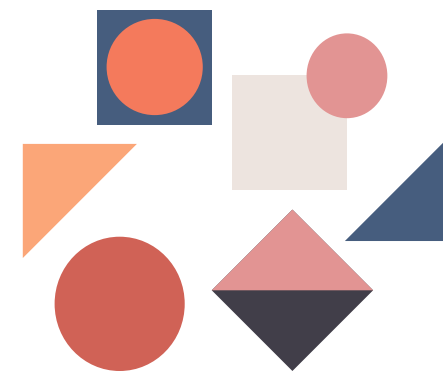
We'd love to run another Relationship Makers programme for a new cohort of community businesses.

Next time we'd expand the programme to include six workshops, enabling us to double down on some of the activities and close with a session dedicated to action planning.



Engage a multidisciplinary cohort

We'd also like to trial running this programme with participants from different parts of the same system (e.g. community businesses, local authorities, commissioners and funders) or from different sectors entirely. We think this could lead to even richer reflection, discussion and action.





For more information about this programme or how you could run your own **Relationship Makers Programme**, please get in touch with immy@relationshipsproject.org

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