



Cyswllt Amgylchedd
Cymru | Wales
Environment Link

Building capacity for collaboration
in the environmental NGO sector in Wales.

Report, July 2021



Mewn Partneriaeth â
Llywodraeth Cymru
In Partnership with
Welsh Government



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FUND**

Facilitation, specialist advice and evaluation.

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1. Summary

This intensive project was commissioned between April and July 2021 as part of a wider capacity building project for WEL members in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. The project was kindly Funded by the Welsh Government, via a grant administered by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Previous research had suggested that there was potential for greater longer-term and strategic collaboration within the environmental sector in Wales. Collaborative working is seen as a way increasing impact and sector resilience. This stability will be crucial at a time when a strong environmental NGO sector will be essential to creating a green recovery and combatting the Nature Emergency.

The main objectives of this project were to:

- Stimulate and encourage collaboration between WEL members
- To create a minimum of three collaborative project concepts that can be further developed
- To develop the knowledge and understanding amongst WEL members of methods used to create and develop large-scale, high-impact projects

The Funding Centre, a third sector consultancy based in Cardiff, were commissioned to provide facilitation, specialist advice and evaluation of the overall project.

The compressed timescales required to deliver this project have created certain challenges, particularly at a time when the sector is under such operational and financial pressures. Despite these challenges, participation has been enthusiastic and positive although there have been logistical challenges in bringing participants together.

After a period of consultation and benchmarking to establish the needs, capacity and capability of the participating organisations, a series of workshops were held. These were intended to build understanding of the processes involved in consortium building and to develop initial concepts that could be developed through the year.

Three potential concepts were generated with working titles:

On common Ground – a programme of activities working with disengaged communities to develop connections with Nature, where they live.

Farming and Fishing for Nature – an ambitious, high impact national programme to change the way we use our farmland and aquatic resources.

National Nature Reserves – building on the energy behind the creation of the National Forest to ensure that we create forests and other habitats that are as good for nature as they are for people.

2. Background

Wales Environment Link (WEL) is a network of environment, countryside and heritage organisations working in Wales, and linking the work of the environmental NGO sector with the Welsh Government, public bodies and the Senedd. Our vision is a thriving Welsh environment for future generations. WEL supports its members to work together, primarily on environmental policy and advocacy, building trust and expertise within the network.

In April 2019, the Welsh Government declared a climate emergency¹, and has since acknowledged the interlinked nature emergency, as referenced in the 2019 Interim State of Natural Resources Report. In June 2021 the Welsh government took a further step and declared a Nature Emergency². The work of the WEL network focuses on tackling the climate and nature emergencies.

This project is part of a broad programme of activity to help prepare WEL members to be more effective in helping address the climate and nature emergencies in Wales. The programme was run over a four-month period from April – July 2021 and included training, research into innovative funding methods as well as this project focusing on consortium working. It was commissioned with financial support from the Welsh Government which was administered by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The Funding Centre were commissioned to deliver this phase of the project providing evaluation of the needs of the sector, specialist advice on the co-creation of projects and facilitation of a number of events and small meetings.

3. Project objectives

The scale and urgency of the Nature Emergency in Wales will require a coordinated and large-scale response from all sections of society if the crisis is to be properly addressed. Given the relatively small size of many of the organisations operating in Wales whose role is to support nature, then collaboration will be needed

A report was commissioned by Natural Resources Wales at the end of 2020 to improve our understanding of how best to support environmental non-governmental organisations (eNGOs) in Wales to contribute to a Green Recovery from the Covid-19 Crisis³. This report has provided helpful and recent insight into the dynamics impacting cooperative behaviour between eNGOs in Wales.

¹ <https://gov.wales/welsh-government-makes-climate-emergency-declaration>

² <https://www.endsreport.com/article/1721069/a-landmark-moment-welsh-parliament-declares-nature-emergency>

³ <https://cdn.cyfoethnaturiol.cymru/media/692607/final-green-recovery-engo-support-report-english.pdf>

The research showed there is a perception that eNGOs operating in Wales are less collaborative than in other parts of the UK, or that they are less ambitious, or reticent to work collectively for funding. The reality is inevitably more complex. Limited resources to invest in developing new projects and conservative attitudes to risk are certainly inhibiting factors for some. For others, there is a sense that competition is more effective than collaboration when it comes to pitching for very limited resources.

Whatever the specific challenges, we know that in order to create successful, large-scale collaborative projects, certain pre-conditions are essential. A healthy funding environment with far-sighted investors being the first of these. A culture of collaboration, mutual trust and shared objectives are also central pillars in other successful sectors, where large-scale collaboration is more commonplace. Not all of these are clear features of the landscape currently in Wales.

Whilst appreciating that creating all these pre-conditions is well beyond the scope of this project, we also understand that potential collaborators can learn the key processes that are needed in order to build effective, long-term partnerships.

This project aims to share some of the tools and techniques that have developed over time that will help to develop the trust, structures and imagination that will be needed to create appealing and high impact proposals.

The main objectives of this project are to:

- Stimulate and encourage collaboration between WEL members
- To create a minimum of three collaborative project concepts that can be further developed
- To develop the knowledge and understanding amongst WEL members of methods used to create and develop large-scale, high-impact projects

4. Methodology

In forming the method, we sought to base our approach on the following principles:

- Listening especially carefully to participants, many of whom are exhausted and frustrated after an incredibly difficult year. They have very limited band-width for “more lecturing” in how to improve. Our intended approach was to be sensitive and supportive.

- We wanted to understand exactly what the individual organisation's capacity, capability and attitude is towards collaboration and to get under the skin of any barriers there may be.
- We needed to share the real-world solutions that we have been developed in other sectors in order to succeed in project development.
- You don't know what you don't know. It is important to inspire participants with replicable examples of successful collaboration but to also fill in gaps in knowledge or skills that will help them to succeed. Many of these organisations are led by highly skilled and experienced practitioners and must be approached positively and with ambition.
- Not all organisations are the same. WEL members are as varied in size, capability, experience and effectiveness as the whole of the voluntary sector. Each organisation needs to be approached individually with a clear appreciation of their culture and experience.

Stage 1: Consultancy and consultation phase

We anticipated a positive reaction to the offer of support via this project. However, it was critical to get senior staff within participating NGOs engaged in this project from larger organisations as well as development staff if they have them. For smaller organisations with very few staff or with very limited time, we needed to ensure that our time with them felt like a good investment of time.

There was very little time in the project available for consultants to spend with participants one to one. It therefore had to be spent very efficiently in order to get maximum value from the time invested. To hit the ground running we created a short self-completion questionnaire that gathered basic information from participants prior to engaging with our consultants, about their organisation, its capacity their experience and so on. This information informed an initial diagnostic call with a named consultant to ensure that we fully understand the best approach for each eNGO. The follow up then comprised a blend of short workshops, one-to-one sessions with key individuals along with occasional follow up calls and coaching.

Our analysis of the diagnostic reports and any feedback from the consultancy sessions then informed the design of subsequent workshops and helped to start forming clear themes around training needs and skills development that could be delivered through this programme or others.

We also used the data gathered during the consultancy sessions to understand the likely areas of potential collaboration – whether this is thematic or sectoral. This information also feed into the design of subsequent sessions and helped us to define the programme of work more accurately.

At the end of this element, we presented the emerging findings and themes to the WEL board to get feedback and response as well as to share our thoughts on the design of the subsequent workshops.

Stage 2: Facilitated workshops and concept development

This stage was the most complex element of the project. We did not want to pre-empt the work that will be undertaken during the consultancy phase, but we could anticipate that participants would have a very wide experience and expectation of what a successful collaborative project might look like.

We aimed to develop three cohorts with the goal of creating at least one strong proposal from each. However demands on participant time meant that we were only able to work with two cohorts and then developed further proposals through one-to-one sessions. From the outset we anticipate that each cohort will be made up of 4-6 organisations of differing sizes and locations with as wide a representation of the membership as is practical.

Each of the workshops were consultant-led and were delivered via Zoom. Participants are very comfortable with the format and were generally comfortable with interactive tools, such as Jamboard. As anticipated most workshops were formed of a mixture of skills development and training along with more participative elements as we develop project ideas together.

Stage 3: Developing the Expressions of Interest

We are fully aware of the limited capacity that most participating organisations have to create complex and ambitious collaborate proposals. The core content of the projects that we want to take to development stage have been created by the participants through the course of the workshops. We acted as facilitator and as editor in chief of these proposals to ensure they meet the needs of the funders identified. More work will need to be done to refine the proposals to the point they are signed off and agreed by the participant groups.

We encouraged each cohort to share the development of their ideas so that they may learn from each other, broker new relationships and encourage further collaboration, well beyond this project. The results of the workshops are outlined in section 7 below.

5. Respondents and participants

We had around 20 participants in total from 13 organisations. These were drawn from an initial shortlist of interested WEL members created in advance of the project. Scheduling was very challenging with participants under significant times pressure as they continue to struggle with the consequences of the pandemic whilst undertaking business as usual or planning for reopening in the Summer. Some of the participants are also taking part in a

large-scale collaborative project, Natur am Byth, which secured its development funding earlier in the year and have been busy getting that work underway.

Organisation represented	Respondents
Bat Conservation Trust	Steve Lucas (Wales Officer)
Buglife	Clare Dinham (Wales Manager)
Bumblebee Conservation	Sinead Lynch (Conservation Manager)
Keep Wales Tidy	Lesley Jones (CEO)
Llais y Goedwig	Maria Wilding (Programme Manager)
PONT	Julia Korn (Director)
Ramblers Cymru	Rebecca Brough (Policy and Advocacy Manager)
RSPB	Michele Hunt (Head of Funding)
Snowdonia Society	John Harold (Director)
Wildlife Trusts Wales	Rachel Sharp (CEO)
Woodland Trust	Natalie Buttriss (Director, Wales) and Catriona Corfield (Head of Diversity and Inclusion)
Marine Conservation Society	Diagnostic Survey only
Campaign for National Parks	Diagnostic Survey only

6. Findings to key research questions

For the initial diagnostic phase of the project, we were seeking to get a clear baseline for the level collaboration in the sector. We also wanted to get a picture of the capability, capacity and attitude towards collaboration in each of the participating organisations – essentially trying to answer the following key questions:

- What is the experience of each organisation of working on collaborative bids?
- What are the main motivations for collaborative working?
- What is the capacity of participating organisation to effectively take part in collaborative bids?
- What is the capability of participating organisation to effectively take part in collaborative bids?
- What barriers to collaboration – what areas are in need of support?
- What are the future priorities for collaboration?

The following findings are a synthesis of the results from an online self-completion survey and a series of consultations and depth interviews that took place during May and June 2021.

a. Experience of working on collaborative projects

Overall, there was a very positive attitude towards the notion of collaboration and clear evidence of cooperative behaviour. For example, all the participants have worked on bilateral and small-scale projects with other eNGOs in the sector – many of which are WEL members or working in related fields.

Cooperation with partners seems to be well established in most organisations we spoke with and many of them had taken the lead in developing projects or preparing successful funding proposals.

The two charts below show that all the participants had at least some experience with most considering themselves to have had “lots of experience” whilst almost half of them having taken the lead in the development of funding proposals for collaborative bids.

Table 1 – Responses to the online survey

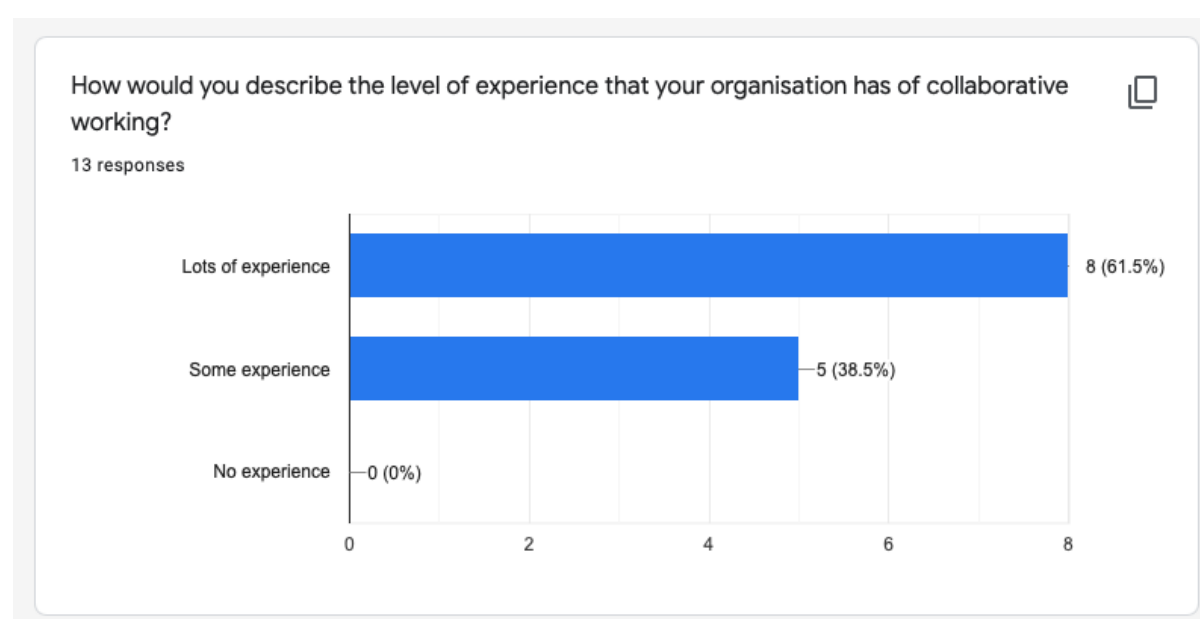
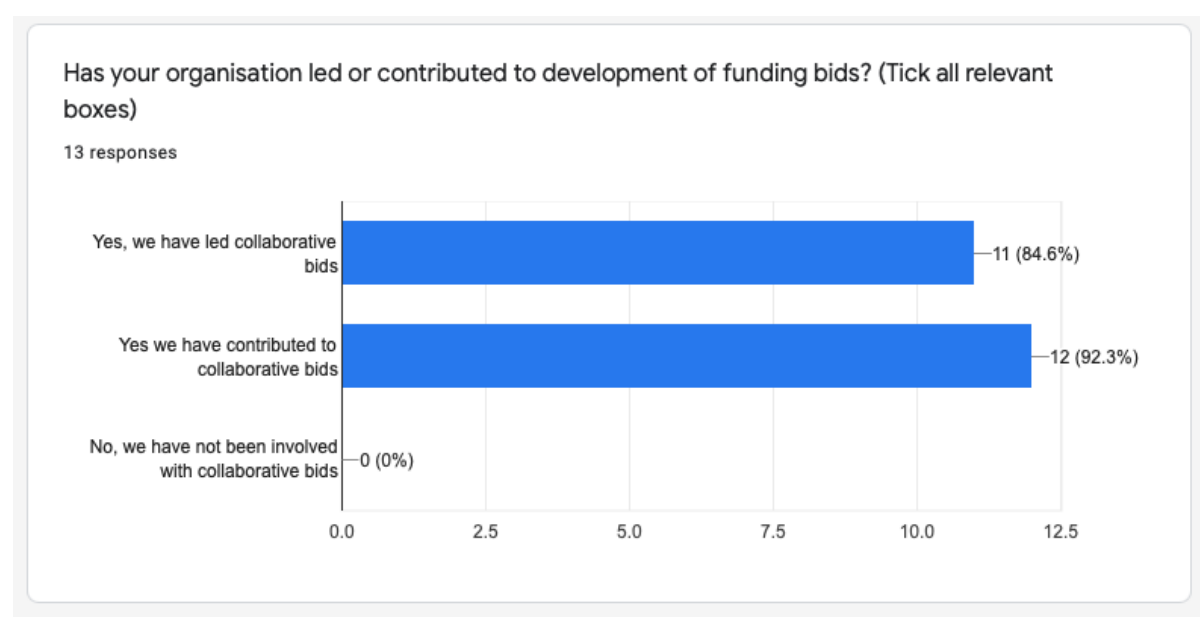


Table 2 Responses to the online survey



During our discussions it was clear that they all had a good sense of their own value and expertise in a collaborative role and they could appreciate how they could complement or add to the impact of the projects they had participated in.

However, it was clear the scale and potential impact of the projects in which most had participated was fairly limited and rather ad hoc. In other words, they had little experience of large-scale partnerships and most had given very little consideration given to long-term collaboration or partnership working.

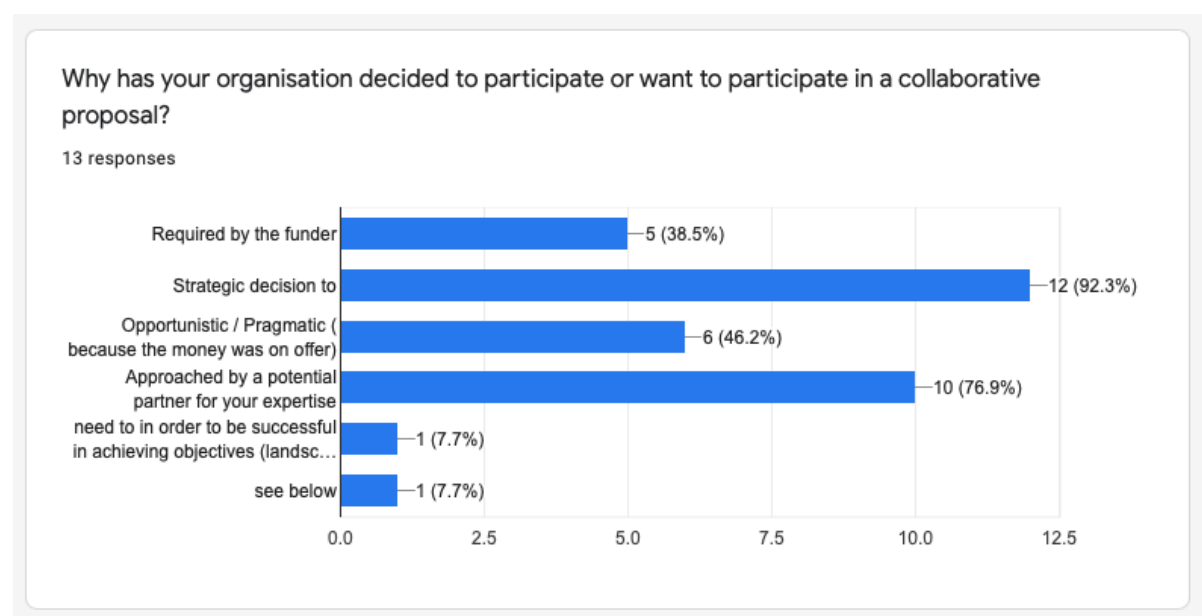
b. Motivations for collaborative working

When exploring the reasons why organisations had entered into partnerships or previous collaboration, the motivations were largely in response to short term opportunity – i.e. reactive rather than planned. These partnership opportunities seem to be driven by the availability of project funding, either as a requirement by the funder or the opportunity to take a “junior” or expert role in a partnership led by another partner.

“It could be a really good way of getting Lottery funding”

The responses in table 3 below are a good illustration of this dynamic with most participants saying that they had been approached by a potential partner rather than the other way round.

Table 3 Responses to the online survey



“We’ll only take on projects that fit with our own objectives”

This reactive approach was particularly apparent in smaller organisations, especially those with limited fundraising capacity or experience. Direct approaches by partners appears to be a way of fundraising with limited risk because the main burden of managing the bidding process falls with the lead partner.

Despite this rather opportunistic approach there was a clear understanding that partnership had to fit with organisational priorities. However the core notion of using partnership

building as a way of furthering strategic aims in its own right was not a consideration for any except the largest organisations.

c. Capacity to effectively take part in collaborative bids.

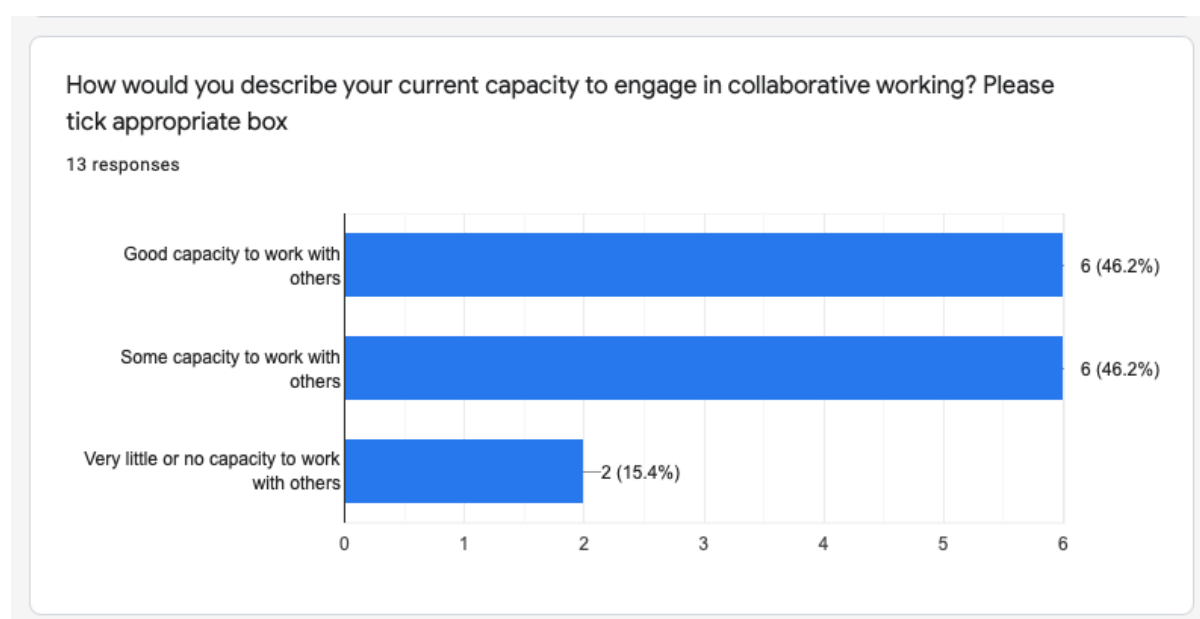
Throughout our work with the participants there is clear exasperation with the competitiveness and complexity of the funding environment with a very clear picture of long-term declining resources for most. When pressed, this lack of resource is the single biggest presenting issue impacting on their ability to create large-scale collaboration.

There is strong evidence to back this finding. Many of the organisations are very small and only have a handful (or less) of project staff in Wales. Others have significant resource in Wales or access to it in England/UK. Even those larger players reported a picture of financial restrictions, reducing staff numbers and increasing workload over the last decade. This situation has only been exacerbated with the Covid crisis and has brought higher levels of uncertainty.

Participants described the particular challenge of resourcing project development in their early stages. There appears to be little capacity in Wales to work on project development and an understandable concern about taking valuable time to develop speculative fundraising for other organisations when they are so concerned about funding their own core work.

When asked about their capacity to take part in collaborative projects the majority had either some or even good capacity to participate, reflecting their willingness to take part but underlining their limitations to initiate partnership projects.

Table 4 Responses to the online survey



Generally, those who have been able to invest in Wales over many years and engage at a policy level over time have done better at building overall capacity. We can assume that this proximity to decision makers has also increased mutual understanding and led to better funding opportunities.

d. Capability in building collaborative projects

Many organisations operating in Wales have evolved as outposts of UK-wide organisations or they have developed from projects that are based here but managed in England. The number of truly indigenous, Welsh eNGOs is limited and as we have noted earlier, tend to be small.

The approach to fundraising generally is rather hand-to-mouth with many staff being funded on a project basis. This is perhaps partly what is driving the highly reactive approach to collaboration rather than being particularly planned or deliberate in building networks.

Basic planning and project development skills are patchy as project staff have to be experts in their field as well as often having to undertake pretty burdensome administration of grants and other immediate tasks. There was very little evidence of any of the participants having any formal understanding of how to build a consortium or large-scale project, other than those from the largest organisations.

On the flip side there appear to be very good bid writing skills, perhaps driven by the very high academic attainment of most people working in the sector. The types of bids that are being produced are often highly complex and demanding to complete well. This would

suggest significant potential in the sector to transfer these skills to other forms of fundraising or at least into exploring approaches to a wider range of funders

With some clear exceptions there is generally poor knowledge (or motivation) to understand wider forms of fundraising beyond the “usual suspects” of Welsh Government, NRW, NLHF and a handful of the larger trusts and Foundations.

There is a real contrast in strategic capability in a Welsh Context – some have manifestos / strategies for Wales and deep knowledge of the policy context others are just an outpost. This type of capability is generally reserved for the larger organisations or those that have been established within Wales.

Like other parts of the voluntary sector, like arts and education, there is a slight bemusement that the case has to be made for financial support – an understandable assumption that they will always be needed. Whilst this is almost certainly the case, some organisations need to explore more deeply, how they can make a stronger case for support for their work and make it appealing to a wider range of funders and donors.

In terms of networks there are some strong existing partnerships and links with:

- Public/ Third sector landowners
- Farmers
- Conversations learning from “head office” or from Scotland and England
- Universities at a modest level with individual academics
- eNGOs within the sector in Wales but often bilateral
- Core set of funders – NRW, HLHF, Trusts,

Table 5 The green area shows where the sector has strong connections, and the blue areas are where they are weakest



e. Barriers to collaboration - areas to support

Inevitably the barriers to collaboration are complex and multi-layered. There is a very healthy self-awareness of the challenges that these organisations are facing, and this is clearly reflected in the self-completion questionnaire as well as in the more qualitative responses given during interview.

“We would love to do more collaboration, but we are too busy dealing with short-term needs.”

The single most significant factor presented is capacity – capacity for development in particular. The lack of core funding for most organisations featured heavily during our discussions along with the ongoing frustration at the significant costs and risk associated with fundraising itself.

Limited networks beyond the immediate eNGO sector were mentioned as a restricting factor

- No real strategy for funding for many organisations
- Out of the loop with the “Cardiff thing” for some of the smaller organisations
- Research and demonstrating evidence of impact – some are struggling to deal with this while others are very effective, for example, Woodland Trust has a research and evidence team
- Some evidence of reticence because they are competitors



f. Future priorities

During our conversations, there were some broad themes established on which we intended to build during the workshops

- Excitement about the appointment of a Minister for Climate Change and the high-level statements being made by the current Senedd in general. Significant work has taken place to lobby for the formal announcement of a Nature Emergency and there is enthusiasm to build on this increased recognition
- Broad discussion of the circular economy and how eNGOs could play their part in driving forward this idea
- The changes caused by Covid-19 and the drive for a green (economic) recovery were mentioned by many
- Ties to broader government policies, in particular the Health and Wellbeing agenda were seen as something the sector could rally around
- The concept of involving more people and a broader range of people in conservation as well as taking a more structured approach to Behaviour Change
- Making clearer connections between land, habitat and the impact of people as well as specific connections with housing, planning and habitat

7. Workshops

a. Programme

Four workshops were held in July 2021 with two cohorts of 4-6 organisations in each.

Group 1

Workshop 1: Wednesday 7th July 2021, 3pm - 5pm

Workshop 2: Wednesday 14th July 2021, 10am - 12pm

Lesley Jones	Keep Wales Tidy
Angela Charlton	Ramblers Cymru
Rebecca Brough	Ramblers Cymru
Michele Hunt	RSPB
John Harold	Snowdonia Society

Group 2

Workshop 1: Monday 12th July 2021, 1pm - 3pm

Workshop 2: Thursday 22nd July 2021, 10am - 12pm

Carol Williams	Bat Conservation Trust
Sinead Lynch	Bumblebee Conservation
Maria Wilding	Llais y Goedwig
Mel Welch	Woodland Trust
Clare Dinham	Buglife

Workshop 1 - Reinvigoration of collaborative projects across the environment sector in Wales

Session length: 2 hours

Objectives:

- Build confidence in setting up large scale, collaborative projects across the environment sector in Wales
- Feedback survey results from WEL membership
- Identify key stages of the process for forming partnerships
- Identify project areas based on the themes identified in the Second State of Natural Resources Report “SoNaRR2020” (for development into concept notes at a later date)

Workshop 2 - Developing concepts for collaborative projects across the environment sector in Wales

Session length: 2 hours

Objectives:

- Revise the process of project development
- Design outline concepts for large scale collaboration to be developed through the year.

b. [Headline concepts](#)

The following three concepts have been developed into draft Expressions of Interest that follow a standard format for large institutional funders such as the lottery bodies or international bodies such as the EU or UN. The groups have agreed to come together later in 2021 to continue the development of the concepts and to build the partnerships with a view to making formal approaches for funding.

The National Nature Reserve

The creation of a national forest for Wales is a cause for celebration and a call to action for the whole of Wales. The logic of creating natural carbon storage whilst also creating jobs in the new green economy is to be applauded and supported. However, for nature this new “plant highway” must be made up of a diversity of plants that can allow a wide variety of Welsh species to thrive and become mixed with other habitats that are equally important for nature, such as meadows, grassland and other wild habitat.

This project will seek to build on the consensus for more trees and more ways to create natural systems for capturing carbon. It will deliver a rich mosaic of habitats to ensure that a diverse environment is created so that nature and people can thrive together.

On Common Ground

This project recognises that for many people, the natural environment is not obviously relevant to their daily lives. If we are going to address the crisis in nature then it is vital that more people understand the issues facing us and understand how their behaviours can have a positive and negative impact on nature. On Common Ground is seeking to engage a far wider audience in Wales with a range of issues impacting nature.

This project will seek to work with communities across Wales to co-design projects that will engage people with nature on their doorstep. It will focus especially on communities that are not typically concerned with conservation - those in urban and peri-urban areas for example or places with higher levels of deprivation or poorer educational attainment.

Farming and Fishing for Nature

We cannot solve the Nature Emergency without fundamentally addressing how we use our farmland and waters. Farmer and fishermen are effectively the custodians of our land and seas and their behaviours and practices will decide the long-term fate of Nature in Wales.

This project will seek to work with the farming and fishing industries as well as policy makers and the public to design a blueprint for a new way of working and living that will enable Nature, and our communities to survive and thrive.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

The eNGO sector is fragile and in need of ongoing support and encouragement as well as resource to enable it to be as effective as it could be. Large scale collaboration clearly has potential to increase the overall impact of the sector and in-turn may have the potential to bring additional resources and greater financial stability to smaller organisations in particular.

This project was clearly welcomed by the participants and despite the challenges of limited resources and time for many, the potential for collaboration is clearly appreciated.

Unfortunately, the very short timescale in which the project had to be delivered and the intense pressure that staff are under has limited the overall impact of the project. The physical restrictions of meeting over Zoom have been a mixed blessing with participants being able to attend from all over Wales, but with limited time for relationship building that takes place more effectively in a physical meeting.

Whilst there is still work to do on the project concepts there is clearly enthusiasm to continue building on the project. The participants have agreed to come together as a larger group (restrictions permitting) to work together on the project concepts.

Recommendations for the sector

Consideration should be given to committing to some long-term plans for collaboration. The declaration of the Nature Emergency could be a key moment for the sector to come together and to propose bold and ambitious projects that can meet the challenge.

Larger organisations with the capacity to develop ambitious project ideas and to influence funders, should be encouraged to take a lead in project design and convening potential partnerships. There are some good examples of this already happening and the experience of developing large scale collaboration such as Natur am Byth should be built on and the skills and experiences of those taking part, built on.

Smaller organisations need to consider how they might fit into a wider partnership where their value can really be felt – the concept of becoming “bid candy” to make a larger consortium more attractive to a funder because of the particular specialist expertise that a small organisation might bring.

There is also a need to work with the larger funding bodies to explore their appetite for collaborative funding in this sector. The Wales Funders Forum is already looking at how they can collaborate with funding to create greater impact. NRW and Welsh Government are seriously considering how they fund and commission work as well as looking at how they fund the Third sector as a whole.

Recommendations for WEL

There is a clear role for WEL and others to facilitate collaboration, and seek resources to create positive cycles of project development. There is also a role for a trusted broker, who can help establish relationships within the sector and beyond. A&B Cymru performs this role in the Arts sector and is not seen by the sector as a competitor for funds but as an advocate for more and better funding.

This work to build collaboration must be seen in a wider context of capacity building that is needed for the sector. There is potential for WEL, with more resource, to work with its members to provide this support and build greater sector resilience. WEL could explore developing a long-term support programme with external support to help advance organisational development of the whole of its membership in the same way that Catalyst Cymru has advanced the capability and capacity of the Heritage sector in Wales over the last decade.