



Subsector partnerships

How Sported engaged its members to improve their impact practice

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Subsector partnerships

The subsector partnerships are projects between Inspiring Impact (II) and organisations with significant reach in a subsector of the third sector to create new programmes with the potential to enhance impact practice throughout their field. The first of these working with Sported in the sports sector is now coming to a close. In this review we will look at what lessons can be learned from this first subsector partnership.

If you would like to know more about the subsector partnerships or any other element of II's work you can contact the Inspiring Impact team [here](#).

Background

[Sported](#) is an umbrella organisation which works to support community sports groups in transforming the lives of disadvantaged young people. It was supported by Inspiring Impact partners [New Philanthropy Capital](#) (NPC) and [Evaluation Support Scotland](#) (ESS) to develop an offering that will help its members engage in better impact practice. This project – Fit for Impact (FFI) – used Inspiring Impact resources combined with FFI Volunteers and peer support workshops (known as learning clusters) to guide a pilot group through eight months of support to enhance their impact practice.

Based on the lessons of this pilot it is planned that FFI will be scaled up to be more accessible to the sports sector as a whole, by moving a substantial portion of its support into an online environment and training additional Sported volunteers to support groups as they progress through the online learning.

The initial FFI Volunteers were trained in April 2016 with the pilot running from April to November 2016. The online platform was launched in September 2016 with refinements and further material to be added up until mid-2017.

This review is based on observations from attending a learning cluster and from participation in a feedback/celebration workshop at the end of the pilot stage of the programme, which examined both how effective the programme had been so far and what it would need to do to successfully translate into a scaled-up form.

Review of learning experiences

A striking feature of FFI is how it has successfully reached out to organisations at multiple stages of the impact practice journey. These learners can be split into two rough categories; those aiming to begin their impact practice journey and those who want to embed and spread change within their organisation.

Beginning their journey

Need: These learners and their organisations had little or no prior experience of impact practice. Their needs are fundamentally around education and training to help identify the best tools and strategies to enhance their impact practice.

Benefits of FFI: These learners engaged well with Inspiring Impact's resources. The most commonly mentioned were [Measuring Up!](#) which helped them to understand the current state of their charity's impact practice, and the [Code of Good Impact Practice](#) which was used to introduce them and the rest of the organisation to key concepts. This group used the FFI Volunteers and learning clusters as a way to introduce them to new concepts in measurement as well as guidance in how to apply this both in improving their services and engaging with funders/wider stakeholders.

Outcomes: Learners were more confident about exploring ways to improve their impact, they had often introduced initial steps in line with the plan-do-assess-review cycle and were talking with their charity about how to further expand and improve.

Beginning their journey case study: changing how you work

One of the most difficult things for an organisation can be realising what you are currently doing not only needs to be improved but needs to be scrapped and replaced. One user noted that as their impact practice knowledge had improved they stopped collecting data using the old system (as they now knew they were not collecting the right information) but as they had not yet introduced their new system they were currently collecting no information. This made it much harder to talk to funders, as while the old information had not been particularly useful to improve impact it had been useful from a comms and fundraising point of view. It also had the potential to be highly demotivating. However, through support from their learning cluster and FFI Volunteer the learner has remained engaged and enthused about impact practice and is looking forward to their new data collection system coming online.

Embedding change

Need: These learners are individually confident in impact practice, and the organisation likely already has some systems in place to facilitate it. However impact practice skills and understanding are concentrated in a small group within the organisation; this makes it

hard to introduce appropriate behaviours and strategies to the organisation as a whole eg, engaging frontline staff.

Benefits of FFI: The learners found II resources useful as a way to codify their pre-existing thinking and introduce it to others. The most useful element of FFI was the personal engagement from FFI Volunteers and learning clusters which allow for tailored support to get resistant members of the organisation to engage with impact practice.

Outcomes: Learners saw wider acceptance of impact practice within their organisation, leading to organisations that are both more ready to engage in effective impact practice and less dependent on one, or a small number of, team members making an impact. This makes impact practice plans more robust, and reduces the feelings of burnout among those who were already engaging in impact practice.

'Before this we used to do outcomes but they were by-products; now outcomes are the purpose of everything we do... they make you able to prove your impact forever, no one can argue against it it's real.. it binds everything together'
Attendee of a learning cluster event

Common features of the programme

Across both learner types there were some common features of the programme which facilitated effective learning.

Sportworks

[Sportworks](#) is a pre-existing online shared impact measurement tool developed by Substance, specifically designed for Sport for Development organisations. The tool quantifies the impact and associated cost savings of Sport for Development activities, using indicators including educational performance, youth offending and physical fitness. The learners were generally already, to some level, familiar with Sportworks. This awareness helped to motivate the learners on their journey and made it easier to build initial trust engagement with the programme. Sportworks itself provided a useful tool which was already tailored to the sports sector, giving a relatively simple introduction to impact practice which (unlike the Impact Hub) was tailored to the needs of the sector – although it should be noted that the future development of the Sportworks tool is under review.

Accessibility of tools

One of the positive features of Sportworks that was highlighted was its use of accessible language making it much less imposing for charities to use. In contrast there was a feeling that some II resources particularly Measuring Up! made overly heavy use of jargon and was generally slightly intimidating. II was aware of this concern from prior user engagement and near the end of the pilot period launched [Measuring Up Light!](#) designed to be more accessible for smaller organisations.

Tailored support

Both Learners and FFI Volunteers found a key factor of the success of the programme was the relatively tailored nature of the support. FFI Volunteers were able to visit organisations to get a feel for their needs and identify members of the team that were harder to reach before engaging with them directly; learning cluster discussions were based on each individual group's needs and expertise. This provided the flexibility needed to allow the programme to effectively support organisations at very different stages of their impact journey and in very different circumstances.

The importance of effective access

Generally learners provided positive feedback about how easy it was to access their FFI Volunteer. This was essential to allow effective tailored support. However some learners reported issues around communication of FFI Volunteers' availability. In one case, a volunteer was unable to support a learner due to a prolonged period of illness and the timeframe of their return could not be communicated to the learners. This delay and gap in support was discovered when the learner enquired after receiving communications mentioning additional support. This example highlights the challenge of volunteer-led support and future programmes could seek to train additional volunteers to fulfil such support roles.

Lessons for future subsector partnerships

A pre-existing network is key

Sported was effective as a subsector partner as not only did it have good reach and a good reputation in the sports sector, it also had a pre-existing network of organisations with a keen interest in enhancing their impact practice, with some already engaging with tools to improve their impact practice, and the appropriate infrastructure to support this ie, Sportworks. This made introducing a cohort of users to II relatively simple, helping to maximise the impact of the subsector partnership. Therefore when seeking out future subsector partners a similar sort of pre-existing network, online or off-line, with associated learning resources should be prioritised.

The need to identify appropriate inspiring impact assets/ the role of the Impact Hub

The Impact Hub was the element of II which received the least feedback, with the learners reporting both a lack of use and general lack of awareness of the Hub. Those that had looked at it generally felt they had too many choices and no clear guidance about which tools were best. A combination of advice from their FFI Volunteer/learning cluster and use of Sportworks seems to have fulfilled many of the roles of the Impact Hub, reducing its usefulness for the subsector partnership.

This brings up an interesting point. It is possible it tells us that a subsector partnership works best with some pre-existing tools tailored to the needs of the sector, although it's hard to say this with confidence without additional case studies. What it does firmly suggest is that, when looking at future subsector partnership, II should be aware of which

assets it brings, which will be relevant and which may be superseded by support the partner already offers.

It also raises questions about whether this is due to a flaw in the Hub itself and whether its usability, especially for people very new to impact practice, is a concern. This is something that warrants further examination but at this stage, due to a lack of appropriate data, a precise answer is not possible.

Creating a sense of community

One of the strengths of the learning clusters and the wider work of FFI has been a clear sense of community between learners. These communities of practice placed them in a good position to continue to enhance the work they do. Based on this, future subsector partners should consider not only how to improve impact practice for individual users of the network but also how to create communities within their network to help perpetuate, maintain and enhance these changes.

Embedding change

A successful feature of FFI has been creating a method which spreads and enhances impact practice not just for one member of an organisation, or a small team, but across the organisation as a whole. In order for a partnership to be successful it should consider how it will also achieve this. Related to this, one of the challenges FFI was not able to fully meet, is how to engage the most resistant members of the subsector. A partnership with a solution to this would be of particular interest.

Understand what can be scaled

A key element of the ideas behind this subsector partnership was that ultimately the support would be scaled up from the current predominantly off-line volunteer driven method to some sort of online platform. However, doing this risks losing some of the features that learners valued most.

When learners talked about the impact of FFI Volunteers and the learning clusters a chief benefit was the direct and personal interaction. Learners valued being able to engage in informal in-depth conversations with their peers and FFI Volunteers; especially in the case of FFI Volunteers being able to react on the spot and reach out to members of the team who seemed less engaged, helping to facilitate wider organisational buy-in. These features were seen as very hard to effectively replicate on an online platform.

There was some acceptance that learning cluster style activities could take place more online through an online forum or similar tool; but if so it would be important that any queries that were raised on the platform were responded to quickly to help maintain interest. A brief review of the pre-existing Sported forum shows an engaged online community that answers questions quickly and clearly shows a commitment to encouraging self-improvement among its members. This suggests sufficient ground work may be in place to successfully tackle the challenge of moving peer support elements online.

Transferring the roles of FFI Volunteers was seen as much harder particularly as this would ideally be done in a way that would still encourage the whole organisation to take part, instead of just one designated team member interacting with an online tool. The main suggestion for how to bring more of the coaching services online was the use of tools like Skype which still involve personal and tailored conversations. However, this would still be

quite time intensive, leading to questions about whether it would be suitable to move this element of FFI online at all.

It is important for future subsector partners to understand as a programme develops what can be scaled and what cannot, and in turn what this means for its final output.

Closing thoughts

Overall the pilot of FFI has been successful. Learners clearly engaged and were interested in improving their impact practice. This led to a tangible shift in the work of organisations with positive behaviour change visible for both organisations new to impact practice and those who are already more established. The central challenge of the programme is how effective it can be at scaling up its model; with particular concerns that in the case of coaching it seems difficult to effectively scale-up and maintain it in the long term while keeping the features users see as essential.

Inspiring Impact

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Over the next decade we will work towards five key objectives under five themes, answering the key questions for the sector:

- What does good impact measurement look like?
- How do we know what we need to measure? How do we measure it?
- How can we compare with and learn from others?
- What's the role for funders?

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