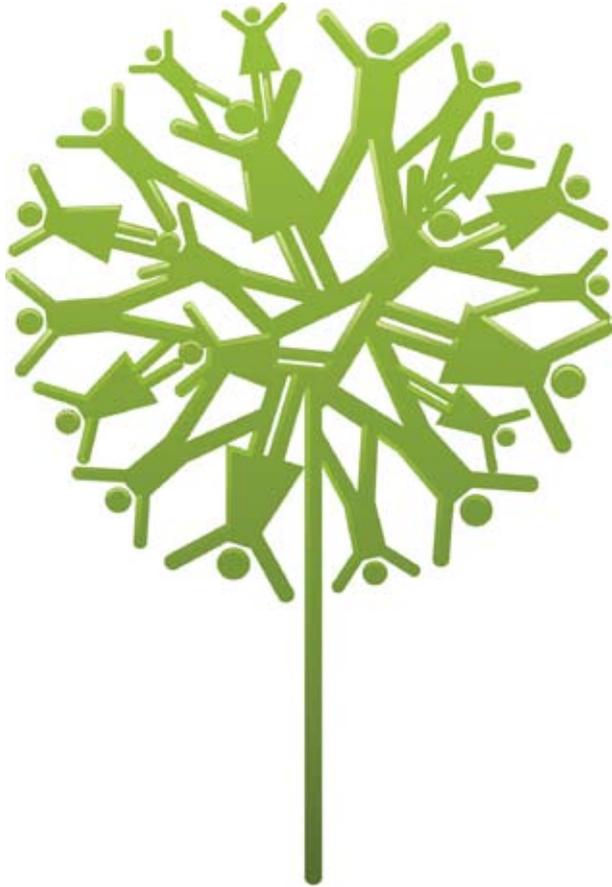


Unlocking Potential



*A Handbook for
Community Animators*



This handbook has been written and designed by a team of practising Community Animators.

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Foreword

These days we hear a lot of rhetoric from officials about ‘community empowerment’. It is a concept that is much spoken of in council chambers and boardrooms but it is also something that is notoriously difficult to do well! Once in a while I have the great privilege to come across a bunch of people who put into practice in real places the fine words in strategy documents. Their hard won experience is like gold dust, but rarely do these successful and busy people have the time or energy left to collect their ideas together for others to learn from.

Carnegie UK Trust, working in partnership with Big Lottery Fund, devised the Rural action Research Programme to do just that; to provide the resources to allow highly successful practitioners to reflect on what works well and to capture these gems in a way that is accessible to all those who may follow in their footsteps.

This handbook is a product of the Rural Action Research Programme, compiled by a talented team of animators from the Communities on the Edge project, managed by Southern Uplands Partnership. This work allowed the experimentation and testing of some exciting new ideas in rural regeneration; adopting a positive ‘asset-based’ approach, working across private, public and third sectors, applying advanced thinking about the long term sustainability of these rural areas.

I am sure that these valuable insights will provide encouragement for those individuals who really want to make a difference in their own communities in future.

Kate Braithwaite MBE

Director of the Carnegie Rural Community Development Programme

Introduction

If ever a story was to be told about transformation, it would be this: the story of how perhaps the most progressive of philanthropic trusts empowered a community organisation, which in turn empowered a team of Community Animators, who in turn triggered a process of empowerment in three rural communities across the South of Scotland. It is a story about the transformation of communities, of groups of people, of individuals. It is a story about the Southern Uplands Partnership's 'Communities on the Edge' project.

The Communities on the Edge project is not one which claims to be innovative or progressive; rather it maintains that the most vital components of successful community development work are rooted in the traditional values of honesty, trust and mutual respect. It is not a project which seeks to retain tight control of specified project outcomes, nor deliver quantified targets to set timescales; rather it aims to unleash the latent creativity of people who in turn will unlock the potential of their places. A project of process over product, it hopes to sow seeds of long term success.

This handbook tracks the journey of the Communities on the Edge project, and hopes to present itself as a useful and perhaps even inspirational tool for those fortunate enough to be playing out similar roles in their own communities. It is by no means comprehensive, nor does it seek to replace the importance of building relationships and learning valuable lessons for oneself. However, it does serve to shed light on a host of situations and experiences which Community Animators will no doubt find themselves in.

May our thoughts and observations be of service to you as you seek to bring about transformational change in your own communities.

John Gold

Communities on the Edge Project Co-Ordinator

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What is an Animator?



*It might also be about something
that little bit more – spirit.*

What is an Animator?

It's the question that we've been asked more than any other since taking up our posts over two years ago now. It's probably the question that we've asked ourselves most too, and the short answer is that we're probably still not sure that we know. Introducing yourself as an Animator to a member of the local community generally results in a snigger or a joke about cartoonists, but we've also found discussing our job titles to be a great way of starting a conversation, beginning that process of engagement and relationship building which you'll soon learn is central to the role of the Community Animator.

The term 'Animator' has never developed the same meaning in the UK and Ireland that it has in much of Northern Europe. In France and Italy in particular, a new meaning is well established. Here, the work of the Animator is concerned with encouraging people and communities into action - working with individuals and groups to encourage them to become more active citizens, breathing life and fire into their underlying passions and supporting them in the shaping and development of their communities.

And so we talk about the role of the Animator as being concerned with community development and capacity building, the empowerment of individuals and groups who, when equipped with the skills, knowledge and confidence they require to make things happen, have been known to bring about transformational regenerative change;

'Animation is that stimulus to the mental, physical, and emotional life of people in any given area which moves them to undertake a wider range of experiences through which they find a higher degree of self-realisation, self expression and awareness of belonging to a community which they can influence'

Report of the European Cultural Foundation, 1973

Animators place local people at the centre of all they do, believing that sustainable solutions are only ever developed when the support of a local community is strongly evident. Animation is about helping communities to help themselves and empowering the individuals within it to make their community a beautiful place to live and work.

It might also be about something that little bit more – spirit.

What's in a Name?

The job title of someone working in a community can be significant, particularly when someone is first being introduced to a community. It can assist the worker to become established and accepted or set the worker apart due to unhelpful word associations.

The following is a brief analysis of the positive and negative connotations of possible job titles.

Animator

A word suggestive of being active and positive, of enthusing, working with (not for) folk, of bringing out the best, of motivating and inspiring (helpfully). Not suggestive of any hierarchical relationship between the worker and the community. Has potential to be perceived as being suggestive of 'pulling strings'. A novel word and therefore may not be understood widely. May be construed as being about film or cartoon making!

Animateur

A 'mysterious' word used extensively in the 1980's and 1990's in France and Italy which may lead folk to ask questions about the worker and give a valuable opportunity to talk about the nature and methods of the work. Likely to be understood by those with a knowledge of the history of adult education. Has potential to be perceived as jargon.

Community Development Worker

An accepted term not generally questioned. Perhaps suggests that the worker is 'doing to' the community. May be perceived as patronising, the term suggesting that a community needs to be developed. Suggestive of a 'service delivery approach' or of being at the beck and call of a community. Constant (unhelpful) reminder that the person is a worker and therefore paid, thus suggestive of delivering 'physical' outputs rather than being focused on capacity building.

Fieldworker

Suggestive of a grass roots, 'bottom up approach' and of the worker not being afraid to get involved – a 'hands on' approach. Has the potential to be confused with natural/ history/ ecology/ survey work. Suggests the role may be concerned with outdoor pursuits or of practical work rather than of working with people.

Facilitator

Suggests a helpful, empathetic approach which brings out and maximises the use of people's skills and talents. A user-friendly term which suggests 'helping along', 'bringing together', 'building on' the existing skills and talents of a community. No hint of hierarchy, but suggests the worker is separate or apart from the community, perhaps being 'brought in' to carry out a specific intervention. Suggests that you may need help and are unable to carry out an exercise without assistance. Has potential to be seen as stirring things up or wanting to move things in a certain way.



"I've loved being called an Animator. If nothing else. It's been a great way to start engaging and conversing with people. The alternative 'development worker' carries negative connotations. The word 'development' in itself implies that people or a community requires changing or developing. While this may be the case, this may not be the view of the indigenous population. The term animator is much friendlier and suggests that the role is a positive one which involves firing up the wider community and initiating local projects. The focus is taken away from the term 'worker' which implies that the person is there to serve a community rather than support and animate it."

Animator Guidelines

Early in the project the team recognised the need to have a bench marking system in place, a list of criteria against which we could evaluate the way in which we were working. The following was the result of that discussion and it remains relevant even now.

- We are local people who are employed to animate other local people into action.
- We are primarily concerned with the ideas, concerns and ambitions of local people – they shape the agenda.
- Often it will simply be our role to signpost people to the relevant agencies or local authority departments equipped to deal with specific issues.
- We cannot and will never be everything to all people and it is important that we are not seen as the local ‘one stop shop’.
- It should be continually stressed that we are here to work with people, not for them.
- Every project which we are involved in requires one vital ingredient – the support and active participation of local people at all stages. If this local support falls away we must firstly pass the ball back into the play of local people in a final attempt to reactivate local support, and then make an objective decision as to whether we continue to support the project.
- Our definition of the term ‘support’ will vary greatly dependent on the make up, experience and expertise of the groups of people we are working with. Different groups will require different levels of support. We should continually evaluate the levels of support being offered to a group and our colleagues should be able to assist us in doing this.
- Capacity building is central to our work and wherever possible we must endeavour to up-skill the people we are supporting, both through formal training and informal learning. The empowerment of local people is our ultimate aim.
- We must strive at all times to maintain a dialogue with the wider community about our work. Openness and transparency is key to the success of building positive relationships.
- It is important to have and maintain the ability to step out of a situation and assess it from a neutral standpoint as far as is possible. We should use our colleagues to assist us with this.

- We must work with people on the basis that if our contracts were to end tomorrow, the work of the group should be able to continue without us. We should never be relied upon to the extent that the success (or otherwise) of a project is attributed to us.
- We should, on a regular basis, make attempts to record our learning and experiences. As well as recording progress and significant successes, we should pay particular attention to the negative experiences of our work and attempt to unravel these as often this is where the greatest value is found.
- ‘Failure’ is not a concept with which we are familiar. We are on a learning journey, both personally and collectively, and if a project does not progress to the extent that we first anticipated, we use the learning from that experience to contribute to the progress of another.
- We are pioneers of a development method and should be rightly proud of this.
- It is ok to feel lost and bewildered.
- We must be able to see our work for what it is – a job – and never let the pressures of it become too great.
- Our lofty aim of creating sustainable rural enterprises and jobs should continue to figure in our work, but we must recognise that significant groundwork and capacity building must go on before this is possible.
- We must always advise local people and make them aware of the importance of sustainability, balancing wish lists with the economic, environmental and social costs of actions.

An Asset Based Approach



Placing people, their skills and attributes at the heart of place based development

An Asset Based Approach

There is currently lots of debate and discussion amongst community development practitioners and researchers around the theme of ‘assets’ and asset based approaches to development. Traditional approaches to development tend to be based around determining need and are often based on deficit models, requiring a community to prove that need before any plans or projects will be supported.

Our asset based approach turns this on its head and suggests that by starting out on a more positive footing, helping people to consider what they do have rather than what they don’t, then longer term prospects for success are increased significantly.

Often the greatest barrier to development is the mindset of people. It is our experience that if that mindset can be changed, however minimally, and a more positive outlook can be established, then much higher levels of participation are achieved and greater levels of energy and enthusiasm are released. This in itself can bring about positive change.

More often than not, assets are referred to in terms of land and buildings. We pose a simple question:

‘What of these pieces of land and buildings without a place to situate them and people to develop and manage them?’

Our understanding of assets has grown to place people and their skills and attributes at the very heart of place based development. It embraces the culture, heritage and natural make up of a place and rubbishes the theory that ownership of assets is best. We maintain that it is the benefits which result in the development or exploitation of a particular asset, and the distribution of these benefits, which takes precedence over mere ownership. In fact, we propose that it is easy to own the asset but much more difficult to grow it, develop it and maintain its’ financial viability.

A simple asset mapping exercise, encouraging people to list the assets of their place and think about why they place value on such things can bring positive results and is a wonderful way to begin engaging with a community. Often the results are quite astonishing and peoples eyes are opened to the fact that the place where they live does indeed have potential.

Some thoughts ...

- Asset mapping is a positive approach to learning about a community. It helps people to think positively about the place in which they live or work. It also challenges the individual to recognise how other people see and experience the same community.
- Assets are what we want to keep, build upon and sustain for future generations. Assets can be physical things like a building, a local park or a nature reserve. Assets can also be intangible such as the work that community groups do and the time and energy invested by volunteers.
- Ownership of physical assets is irrelevant. It is security of access to and the flow of benefits between and from assets which make the difference to the quality of life in an area.
- Developing a physical asset owned by another requires a sophisticated and mature relationship between the two parties which often takes many years to develop.

Mapping community assets means:

- Collecting an inventory of all the good things about the community
- Ranking the assets in order of what local people place most value upon
- Discussing and listing the reasons why people place a high value on the identified assets.

Key Points about asset mapping include:

- It is a positive approach to community development, focusing on what a community has rather than what it is lacking
- It combines or unites community interests and has the potential to create a uniting common cause, or form the basis for a widely supported local action plan.
- It is easy and fun to do
- It is realistic since it identifies what a community actually has to build on
- It is a process of discovery - there are always far more assets in a community than most people realise and this is a very positive way to start a dialogue
- It is inclusive both in terms of considering both community and private assets and also in having the potential to involve the whole community, a wide range of age groups, as well as a variety of public, private and voluntary sector partners

The Skills and Characteristics of Successful Community Animators



You'll be an individual, with a unique set of skills and qualities which will make you fit for the job.

The Skills and Characteristics of Successful Community Animators

The characteristics of a successful Community Animator are not prescribed, nor should they be. You'll be an individual, with a unique set of skills and qualities which will make you fit for the job. You will also require to learn new skills and you'll never know it all – but you'll journey in a spirit of learning, be open to new possibilities and be as humble as you are confident.

There will never be the 'perfect' Community Animator – but you will strive to do the best you can, meeting people in their own places and maintaining a fundamental respect for all. You may even be a part of the community where you will work requiring you to develop restraint and resilience, learning to see the successes of your work in very different ways. At times you will no doubt be frustrated, but you'll also be energised by the enthusiasm of others.

As Animator's we've been privileged enough to be part of a larger team in which varying levels and sources of support have been found. Critical friendships have developed and we rely on our colleagues to guide and support us. You will learn to welcome and respect the feedback, support and questions of a network of many people and they too will rely on your support. As well as sharing negative experiences and supporting one another through difficult situations, it's important to celebrate success with colleagues and allow them to feed from a positive experience, regardless of how small.

Working alone in this field of work would be tremendously difficult; dealing with the pressures of local politics, handling and managing people's perceptions and expectations of your role and supporting local people and groups through what can be very complex processes. Formal training may be required and can give you practical skills to employ when dealing with a community group. Training in communication and listening skills may also help you become the sensitive, respectful practitioner that you ought to be.

And of course you will make mistakes and occurrences will take place which can be perceived locally as failures. Do not fear these situations as it is in working through them that you will learn the most valuable of lessons and develop to become the most effective practitioner.

Some thoughts ...

- Regardless of how difficult an individual is being, Animator's must remain professional and engage with them on the same terms as they would any other individual. Indeed, it may be necessary and appropriate to invest more time and resources in such individuals.
- Animators are open to new ideas and change on a large scale, regardless of how ridiculous or far fetching such suggestions may initially appear to be.
- Animators possess a fundamental respect for all whom they meet and encounter through their work.
- Animators have an innate ability to view a situation from a variety of perspectives, and are willing and able to respect the views of all, regardless of personal position.
- Successful Animators who work and live in the same community are able to distance themselves from situations when appropriate and have an ability to view that community from an internal and external perspective. They will be willing to ask for support from colleagues or wider support networks in order to achieve this.
- Animators believe strongly that all have a contribution to make, and respect the decision of those who do not wish to take part.
- Animators must work at a pace set by the community.
- Animators lead by example.
- Animators learn, in time, to accept disappointment as part of the job but recognise that all experiences, regardless of how joyous or negative, are of value.
- Animators do not control or manipulate situations; rather they encourage and promote the freedom of others' spirits.
- Chaos is not necessarily a negative thing
- Working with colleagues in a locality can offer valuable support but can also be intense and frustrating.
- To let others lead requires strength and courage.

Investing in Relationships



Animators invest in relationships which form the solid foundations for swift and effective future partnership development.

Investing in Relationships

Animators have a small but significant role to play in the 'grand scheme of things'. We believe that local action is the only sustainable way to successfully impact on global situations, yet appreciate the need to be aware of and become involved in wider regional, national and international agencies and networks. Partnerships and innovative relationships, often with the most unexpected of people, are necessary in order to maximise the impact of a project or initiative, and can provide support and assistance, particularly where positive relationships exist.

We've come to realise that the importance of personal, one to one, face to face relationships cannot be underestimated in the process of building effective partnerships. Regardless of status, position, sectoral background or personality, relationships have required initiation, formation and maintenance. Animators invest in relationships which form the solid foundations for swift and effective future partnership development.



Sharing coffee breaks and getting to know each other on an individual basis has allowed mutually respectful relationships to grow and while it can't be proved this wouldn't have happened within a different set up, positive results have been achieved as a result of sharing office accommodation. The moment when I knew we'd been accepted as part of the working community came with an invitation to attend their Christmas Party!

Some thoughts ...

- Working in partnership requires commitment, patience and constant reaffirmation.
- Animators may require training to understand partners' expectations, objectives and operation.
- The person with who you have the best working relationship may not be the person in a partnership organisation with the power to make things happen.
- It's important to work out who has the power to make decisions within a group or organisation.
- People in different positions in a partnership may have different expectations regarding outcomes.
- Partnership outcomes need to be agreed at the outset and progress towards delivery regularly monitored.
- Relationships require establishment and nurture.
- Sharing accommodation with partners can be beneficial.
- Try and find a contact from the start that understands the project and use them within their own organisations as a communication tool.
- Partners may vary greatly in size and ability to commit personal, physical and financial resources.
- Despite good intentions community planning organisations may not be equipped to work with communities.
- Respect all existing local organisations and initiatives and invite them to be a part of your project from the beginning.
- Don't be precious. Be willing to let go.
- Keep an open mind as to when to keep plugging away at a partnership relationship and when to walk away and channel your energies elsewhere
- Relationships are always worth developing and cultivating, even if no 'goal' is in sight.
- To enable the synergy of a partnership to be achieved requires training and encouragement of all partners, as well as patience, energy, enthusiasm and commitment by all partners. For this to happen as effectively as possible someone needs to have dedicated time to devote to partnership development

Animating your Community



Listen to them, their concerns and their secret passions – let them inspire you

Animating Your Community

The way you start out in a community will define the success of your future work. It's vital to take it slowly and not rush in. Get to know people – in the pub, at the community centre, the school. Listen to them, their concerns and their secret passions – let them inspire you. Map local groups and organisations and establish where power is held and decisions are made.

Invest time in getting to know a place and its people and never discount an opinion, no matter how well informed, or indeed misinformed – these perceptions tell stories and give clues about the dynamics of a place and how its people might be mobilised. Senses will become important at this stage and you will learn to hear the two sides of a story equally.

You will maintain a regular dialogue with the wider community at all times and leave doors open rather than closed. You will also learn that transformational processes happen as a result of small but consistent actions. Traditional values become important at this stage and we've learnt that honesty is always the best policy. Respect, common courtesy and good manners are never wasted.

Like many you may have become accustomed to a 'service delivery' approach, working for and on behalf of others to deliver a project. This approach works against the principles of successful capacity building and effectively disables a community, leading to the creation of a gap or void when a development post or project comes to an end. The approach of the Animator differs significantly and is concerned with building capacity and resilience, replacing the urge 'to do for people' with a need 'to do with people.' This 'hand in hand' approach ensures that the skills and knowledge accrued as the result of working on a community project are left within that community to be applied to future developments.

Working with a group to progress a project idea will surely be the area of work which is most enjoyable and the most challenging. It's very easy to quickly become engaged in the work of the group and lose the focus of your capacity building role. A 'hands off' approach may be required so as to avoid being seen as the 'leader' or 'manager' of a project. Effective Animation will require restraint as you learn that people and groups must learn their own lessons. This will be particularly difficult if you perceive a group to be heading in the wrong direction after having unleashed their collective potential. You can support them and guide them, but inevitably you must follow the will of the group. You may well be proved wrong, but if this ends in failure or disappointment, as part of the development process encourage the group to embrace that failure, learn lessons and move on. Encourage people to celebrate successes, no matter how insignificant they may appear and be aware when your presence is no longer required.

Some thoughts ...

- A new project or initiative can be a fresh start and bring new energy to a community.
- There may be initial negative impressions to be overcome due to the name of a project, the assumptions of project designers, the start of a new project and existing groups feeling as if their territory is being invaded.
- Communities should be offered an opportunity to participate at the design stage of a project rather than being targeted or (worse still) having a project imposed upon them.
- Take time to find out how a community 'ticks' so as to start on the right footing and avoid alienating key individuals.
- 'Asset Mapping' (and follow up thereof) can be an effective starting point for engaging a community.
- It is important to take time to appreciate all the skills and talents available in the community that might be harnessed.
- Take time to understand the groups/ communities needs/ aspirations/ wishes – the 'awareness raising and listening' phase.
- When starting out, setting up a Community Steering Group with key community members could be beneficial. This group should be involved throughout the project although requires a sincere commitment from those participating.
- There are pro's and con's of taking the views of local folk as correct (as compared to the pro's and con's of finding out for oneself).
- You must be prepared for things not to happen as expected or promised.
- All you can do is to challenge and encourage people to take action.
- It's important to remain 'external' to a community group.
- There are always two sides to every story.
- It's important to ensure you are treated with respect – a community might listen to what an expert has to say, but not a local Animator.
- Outside agencies may not do a better job than the community itself.
- A community group may feel out of its depth carrying out, for example, a community consultation but may indeed have the skills and attributes necessary for the job. Encourage groups to attempt such exercise themselves – the results will be far more genuine and in the process relationships will be established with the wider community. Building the capacity of community groups is the focus of an animator's work and the process may even be more worthwhile than the outcome.

- Outside agencies may ‘take over’, particularly those who have no sense of understanding about the overall aims of a project. Be prepared to head this off at an early stage before the community’s aims of the project are side lined.
- It can be very positive to bring in external organisations to present new approaches and inform the local community of developments elsewhere.
- Sources of encouragement and mutual support are hugely beneficial.
- A sense of realism (as to what is achievable) is vital.
- “Oak trees from acorns may grow.” Every journey starts with the first step and the end of the journey may not come for many years after the Animator has gone.
- It is important that a project is in the ownership and control of the community group. It is important not to enforce the Animator’s own agenda. Offer critical friendship, not advice.
- Appropriately timed visits by community groups to other inspirational projects are important and can stimulate enthusiasm. A second or return visit is also often worthwhile – there is a balance to be struck between inspiration and sensory overload. A resulting ‘can do’ attitude should be the aim of a visit.
- Animators need not be present at every meeting of a group – indeed it can be beneficial to not always be there.
- A developmental approach rather than one of service delivery should be taken – do not fall into the ‘admin trap’ and avoid setting precedents at an early stage.
- Use teachable moments and lead by example e.g. suggest rearranging chairs into a circle to encourage greater participation.
- Ensure a group recognises and learns from its failures and steps forward on a positive footing.
- Pay attention to group working techniques – be aware of dominant or quiet personalities, personality clashes and judge interventions carefully.
- Organisations which have been in existence for a period of time will be used to their own systems and ways of operating. Changing this culture, if required, will be a long process. ‘Drip feeding’ new ideas over a period of time can reap rewards.
- Celebrating successes no matter how insignificant they may appear is highly motivational.
- Don’t flog dead horses
- You must not be put off by a lack of mandate for further action.
- Be prepared to deal with rudeness and inconsistency.
- A commitment to inclusiveness and equality is very demanding.
- You may have to be prepared to say ‘no’ to a group.
- Strive to ensure a group does not become dependent. Build in an exit strategy to leave a group at an appropriate time.

- You can only 'lead horses to water'!
- Avoid 'latching on' to groups and over encouraging them for personal reasons.
- Be prepared to refer groups to specialists either because it's appropriate or because you don't have the required skills.
- Ensure a group is fully committed before giving 'full' support.
- All groups have to form, storm, norm and disband.
- Beware of raising expectations.
- Perseverance is a great attribute.



As an animator living in the place I work, there have been discussions around the pro's and cons of this. In the early stages the one thing that glaringly stood out to me were the total false perceptions I had of some people. The one's who I thought were engaged and on board and understood the concepts of how we worked were the very ones who weren't. People who I thought would be harder to engage proved to be refreshingly the opposite.



southern uplands partnership
living land, living community