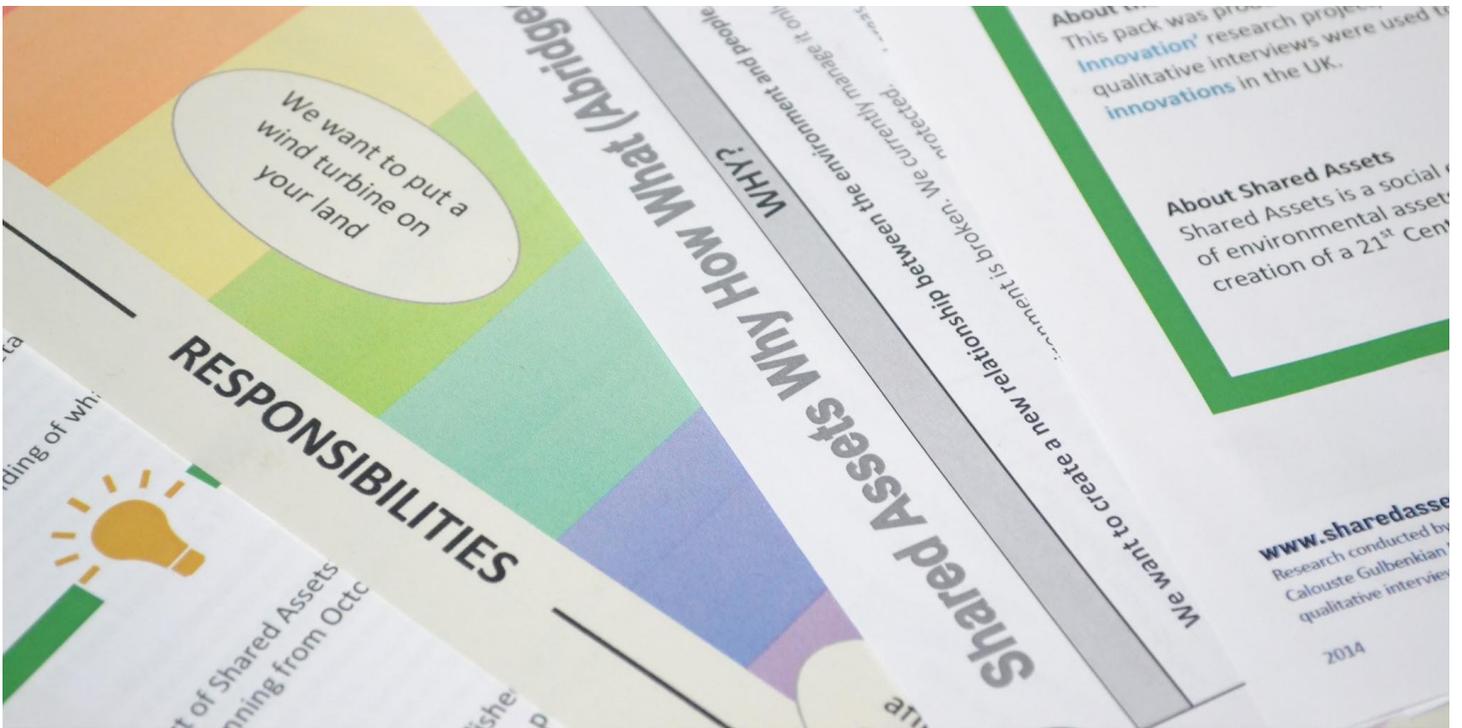


# SHARED ASSETS

## Supporting Land-Based Social Enterprises



Rebecca Seglow Hudson



## Executive Summary

Shared Assets is a social enterprise dedicated to making land work for everyone. We focus on supporting new models of land use aimed at social and environmental outcomes. Established in 2012, the organisation offers support to land-based social enterprises, as well as operating policy, research and consultancy functions.

This report explores some of the key issues to consider when supporting new land-based social enterprises. The findings are drawn from interviews with 13 representatives from land-based social enterprises who received direct technical, business and training support from Shared Assets.

Interviews focused on the practitioners' experiences running land-based social enterprises and the support received from Shared Assets, other organisations, and peers. The research also aimed to identify key barriers for burgeoning organisations and to identify ideal support they felt the sector lacked. This is not a systematic evaluation of support for land-based social enterprises, but provides a framework to improve on the support provided to the emerging land-based social enterprise sector.

### Key findings and recommendations:

- The work of these organisations is often irregular, which makes structured forms of support and networking difficult to negotiate. Facilitating ad-hoc and practically focussed networking opportunities may be more valuable than encouraging regular participation in a network or capacity building programme.
- Difficulty accessing land and working with (often public) landowners are key barriers.
- The relatively casual and ad hoc origins of many land-based social enterprises mean they can struggle with developing into businesses with professional credibility and technical expertise.
- Participants described a feeling of regularly 'treading water'. Focusing on the immediate activities needed to sustain their organisations can prevent organisations from developing.
- Key support needs include help with governance, networking, skills development, developing relationships, and engaging communities.
- Participants all valued peer to peer learning. All interviewees had independently contacted, and often taken the time to visit, projects similar to their own to learn from others' 'possibility models'.
- Some respondents felt that developing local relationships was the most effective form of networking. Further work is required in order to explore where interest-based networking and place-based networking are most appropriate.
- Collecting knowledge about successful land based social enterprise and making it accessible is crucial, both to supporting organisations and to prevent the repetition of work. A system for linking to, storing and disseminating existing knowledge could help the sector to develop.
- Shared Assets occupies a valuable position between the world of grassroots projects and that of policy, business and landowning organisations. It can best support the development of the sector by working with and connecting different groups, and developing 'possibility models', strategies, and research for projects to draw on.



## 1. Introduction and background

### 1.1 Shared Assets

Shared Assets is a social enterprise dedicated to making land work for everyone. We support the development of new business and governance models for land and natural resources that deliver shared benefits for landowners and communities. We are a unique centre of knowledge and expertise, working with communities, landowners, researchers and policy makers, to explore the sustainable, productive management of land for the common good.

We support our clients to manage land and natural resources as assets that deliver shared social, economic and environmental benefits. Land is often seen as a liability, as an unproductive burden or as something fragile that needs protecting from people. We support communities and landowners to work together to manage land as a productive asset.

### 1.2 Land-based social enterprises

[‘Land-based social enterprise’](#) refers to organisations that generate income working with ‘environmental assets’, whilst reinvesting any profit into their primary social or environmental purpose. This definition covers a wide range of organisations. Land-based social enterprises can perform many different activities, from [education in woodlands](#) to [river stewardship](#) to [rejuvenating public squares](#). They have diverse business models and work with all sorts of different environmental assets. Despite their diversity, they share a number of common [issues](#) such as the [cost of land](#), difficulty with [developing sustainable business models](#), and problems with local authority [commissioning](#) and [planning](#) processes.

One particularly attractive aspect of land-based social enterprise is that seeks to deliver social, environmental and economic value, whilst also aiming for financial self-sufficiency. This kind of model is [especially attractive in a policy climate of austerity and localism](#). Land-based social enterprises offer ways to make many environmental assets more productive. They can also deliver greater community engagement, income for the local community and improved environmental outcomes. Interest in the sector is growing, with recent Big Lottery Fund programmes around [community asset management](#) and [local woodlands](#). However, most examples of land-based social enterprise remain small and often subsidised by grant funding. Many struggle even to gain access to the land they want to take on.

### 1.3 The support programme

The programme was funded by [Tudor Trust](#). It provided training, resources and advice to emerging land-based social enterprises. Topics included business models, scaling projects, dynamics within organisations, funding bids, governance structures, and negotiations with landowners. The aims were:

- a. To provide land-based social enterprises with support to aid their development
- b. To explore how best to provide land-based social enterprises with a community of support and resources so that diverse groups could learn from each other



- c. To allow Shared Assets to better understand the needs of land-based social enterprises so as to feed back to our consultancy, research and policy work.

Support was given to over 40 organisations, some of whom also participated in an online community on the Shared Assets website. Most of these groups were small and had formed in the twelve months prior to contacting Shared Assets. The main reason for signing up was to get initial support to get their projects off the ground.

## 1.4 Research objectives, methodology and limitations

The interviews were designed to understand the support needs of the land-based social enterprise sector, and barriers to meeting those needs. This meant investigating the organisations' experiences, the issues they faced running a land-based social enterprise, and their contact with various forms of support.

Interviews were conducted with representatives from 13 organisations. The interviews played a dual role, first in understanding how best to help each organisation, and second in learning how to help the sector in general. This paper focuses on the information generated about the latter.

Organisations were first contacted for an initial briefing and to arrange an interview with the person best suited to answer the questions. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with each project representative over the phone. The interviews used a general structure based on exploring the issues discussed above. In interviewing these practitioners, we were aiming to establish:

- a. Their current activities, challenges, ambitions and needs
- b. Their experiences of the support offered by the Shared Assets programme
- c. Experiences of other support including:
  - i. Events and face-to-face networking
  - ii. Online resources
  - iii. Gaps in available support, resources and events

Table 1 indicates the location of these groups, the activities they were trying to deliver and the support they wanted to access from Shared Assets. There was reasonable diversity amongst those interviewed in terms of region and main activities. However, it is important to recognise that due to the nature of this support programme, most of the organisations were at an early stage of their projects. Considering this, the experiences, barriers and needs discussed here are more relevant for early-stage organisations than the land-based social enterprise sector as a whole.

This work was not designed to be a systematic evaluation of support for the sector. It has been influential for us in helping us consider our next steps and we hope others can also now benefit from this learning. We would also welcome comments on how to further develop this work.



## 1.5 Report outline

In Chapter 2 we consider the main barriers described by the organisations interviewed. Chapter 3 moves on to consider what they saw as their main support needs. Finally, in Chapter 4 the report discusses what kinds of support they viewed as more and less useful.

*Table 1: Organisations/ practitioners interviewed*

<b>Region</b>	<b>Activities undertaken</b>	<b>Desired support</b>
<b>London</b>	Taking on park, garden and buildings management to provide training and employment opportunities	Access to the asset, developing land management skills, technical support, access to finance.
<b>South East</b>	Managing two parks to provide community events, training, education and reduce carbon emissions through a travel plan.	Access to the asset, business model support, technical support
<b>London</b>	Own and manage a heritage path with better public access and community engagement.	Develop the organisation, business skill support, developing land management skills, access to finance
<b>East of England</b>	Establish a cafe and learning centre from an allotment based community growing project	Access to the asset, develop the organisation, business skill support, technical support, access to finance
<b>South East</b>	Creating urban public space to fit with a Victorian town in accordance with local universities, and planners.	Developing the organisation, business skill support, access to finance
<b>South East</b>	Take on a derelict school for community centres, a spiritual group, cafe and growing project	Technical support, access to finance, access to the asset, developing the organisation
<b>West Midlands</b>	Developing an orchard and engagement with the history of the green space.	Developing the organisation
<b>London</b>	Engaging young offenders and at risk youth with training and employment based in a park.	Access to the asset, developing the organisation, business model support, developing land management skills, technical support, access to finance
<b>South West</b>	Preserve a network of green spaces and get local people involved with these spaces.	Access to the asset, technical support
<b>South East</b>	Creating residential and seasonal moorings near Oxford	Developing the organisation, access to the asset
<b>South West</b>	Growing and delivering local food whilst providing training, community events and education	Developing the organisation, business skill development, access to finance
<b>East Midlands</b>	Establish a community hub and farm garden on ex council land.	Access to the asset, developing the organisation, business skill development, access to finance, technical support
<b>North West</b>	Establish a self funding site for community work and research.	Access to the asset, business skill development, technical support, access to finance

## 2. Barriers facing land-based social enterprises

This chapter draws on the interviewees' experiences developing their projects and the barriers that made it difficult to achieve their aims. Understanding these experiences can help design and deliver support that addresses the practical issues facing land-based social enterprises. Again, it is worth mentioning that these findings mainly relate to organisations at early stages of development.

### 2.1 Accessing land

Some of the organisations interviewed were still struggling to access the sites they wanted to work on. Accessing land is a huge issue for many social enterprises, in particular due to [a lack of information about suitable land](#), and the [high cost of land](#). Another major reason given for this was issues with engaging with local authorities.

### 2.2 Issues with local authorities<sup>1</sup>:

Some participants mentioned 'broken promises' from (predominantly public) landowners, where land, buildings, leases or opportunities had been suggested but never delivered or, in some cases, spoken about again. Frequent staff changes in local authorities contributed to this problem for some organisations, making it easier for contacts to be lost and things to 'fall apart'. Others described securing contracts, agreements and licenses as 'impossible'. In some cases, there was a perceived lack of input by those 'high up' in landowning organisations. Commitments in rhetoric were followed by an absence of the time, thought, energy and resources to make projects happen.

### 2.3 Lack of resources<sup>2</sup>

The lack of various kinds of resources was a ubiquitous issue for the land-based social enterprises involved in this programme. They discussed the pressures volunteering put on other parts of their lives, and the lack of time, energy and resources available for them to invest in their projects. There was a common feeling of 'treading water'. All of them found that serious strategic planning and innovation was hard to accommodate alongside their immersion in day-to-day requirements. Some respondents had day jobs, whilst others spent their time managing their projects but were underfunded and understaffed, and so felt unable to progress or scale their work.

Problems with decision-making were also tied up closely with this lack of resources. For some, there was a real difficulty negotiating agreements and making decisions either within the group or with partners, and this took up a great deal of their time. Others reported an over-reliance on particular individuals,

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<sup>1</sup> See also, Shared Assets blog on commissioning: <http://www.sharedassets.org.uk/policy/commissioning-for-social-value/>

<sup>2</sup> See also, Shared Assets blog on sustainable business models: <http://www.sharedassets.org.uk/policy/developing-sustainable-business-models/>



which meant those individuals felt they had to take on everything. This lack of resources and the constant feeling of treading water, were seen as preventing organisations from developing.

## **2.4 Difficulty running a business in a deprived area**

Many projects work in deprived communities, which can exacerbate the lack of resources. Participants mentioned the importance of organising and networking locally. Tackling local poverty was seen as an immediate issue for some projects and local engagement and improving local economies were often key aims. However, they described the difficulty of attracting customers and developing income streams in poor areas.

## **2.5 Erratic pace of work**

Participants also discussed the uneven pace of land-based work. They described long waiting periods- for planning permission, or agreement of asset transfers, for example- and then moments of intense, fast moving organisational development. They explained that this would mean that they would have a wide variety of different needs at various points in their projects' development. This also meant that rigidly structured training and support could easily result in that support being ineffective.

## **2.6 Difficulty moving from informal to formal**

Participants discussed the gap between the informal volunteerism of community groups and the need for social enterprises to have formal policies, legal structures, and relationships with the land. Practitioners were keen to move from informal organisations to self-sustaining professional enterprises, but felt the required shift in language, credibility and knowledge was hard to achieve.

### **3. The support needs of land-based social enterprises**

This chapter describes areas where the practitioners felt their organisations really needed support. This is not a comprehensive list of the support needs of land-based social enterprises. However, it is a good starting point for any organisations supporting land-based social enterprises. It could also help new organisations anticipate and seek out as early as possible the types of support they are likely to require.

#### **3.1 Governance**

Organisations wanted support to develop robust legal and democratic structures, seeing this as essential to moving their project forward. In particular, they felt that support could help in setting boundaries with volunteers, trustees and colleagues and developing clear agreements with landowners.<sup>3</sup>

#### **3.2 Developing relationships with key stakeholders**

Participants were concerned with developing relationships in order to be taken seriously by key stakeholders such as local authorities and other landowners. This is a particularly important issue for newer organisations. Participants saw their relationships and reputations as essential to moving projects forward. Relationships are important for achieving social and environmental missions, building sustainable businesses, and achieving professional legitimacy. Expanding on concerns around professional legitimacy and the gap between practitioners and professionals, participants identified networking and negotiation with authorities as a high priority. Convincing authorities of a project's legitimacy and credibility was considered crucial to securing land and contracts.

#### **3.3 Community engagement**

Organisations were interested in improving their community engagement, in particular with local vulnerable groups. As discussed in Chapter 2, some had identified increasing engagement with communities as a major goal. Thus they were interested in support for local networking and organising, and for trying to find ways to involve local vulnerable groups in their work.

#### **3.4 Developing skills and knowledge<sup>4</sup>**

Running a land-based social enterprise requires a wide range of skills and knowledge. Provision of these is one of the main support desires of these organisations. For some participants, their lack of knowledge about one aspect of their project (e.g. land legislation, community involvement or business management) was the key reason they came to Shared Assets for support.

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<sup>3</sup> See also, Shared Assets blog on setting up agreements: <http://www.sharedassets.org.uk/policy/setting-up-supportive-land-sharing-agreements/>

<sup>4</sup> See also, Shared Assets blog on skills gaps: <http://www.sharedassets.org.uk/policy/the-skills-needed-to-make-land-work/>



One obvious need was for land-management skills, i.e. the practical skills needed to manage land productively. However running a modern land-based social enterprise also requires a wide range of other skills such as business skills to run a financially sustainable organisation and team management skills. Respondents were particularly concerned with getting support on how to manage teams of volunteers.

Practitioners were also interested in receiving information on issues that could affect them. As discussed, many of these organisations have a lot on their plate, so they lack the time to keep up to date with all the information that may affect their practice. They want support organisations to keep track of this information and communicate it in an accessible way, as is discussed further in Chapter 4.

### 3.5 Networking and peer support<sup>5</sup>

Despite some reservations (discussed in Chapter 4), participants expressed a desire for support organisations to help them access networking opportunities. Some said that place-based networking was their primary objective, arguing that land-based projects should be concerned with place rather than specific interests or activities. One interviewee described a network of diverse projects within a local authority as a powerful tool, potentially swaying local politics, making connections with nearby expertise and transforming a place by pursuing a common agenda. Whilst some recognised the need to be connected with similar projects, in this sample at least, this was a lesser concern.

### 3.6 Understanding what is possible

This final need is strongly related to several of the above issues. Perhaps because the organisations taking part were relatively early in their development, many felt it was crucial simply to have ‘possibility models’: an understanding of what was possible for an organisation like theirs. One of the main reasons that they wanted support from networks and their peers was to see what other organisations had achieved, in order to develop their own plans and ambitions.

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<sup>5</sup> See also, Shared Assets blog on the value of Networks, available here: <http://www.sharedassets.org.uk/policy/networks-promote-land-based-social-enterprise/>

## 4. What Constitutes Good Support?

Chapters 2 and 3 introduced some of the barriers faced by land-based social enterprises, and some of the support needs they reported. This chapter moves on to explore how support can best meet these needs, and help organisations overcome barriers. In the interviews, participants were asked about the support they had received from Shared Assets and from other organisations. This chapter considers their responses regarding what forms of support they consider most useful, and how support organisations can best help support land-based social enterprises.

### 4.1 Support should be matched to the organisation's needs

A common theme was the idea that support cannot be an out-of-the-box, one-size-fits-all, package. Rather, it needs to be flexible and able to provide different support at different stages and for different organisations.

The stage of development of the organisation was one key factor, with the support required largely dependent on what it is facing in the near future. Even if two organisations had very similar objectives, they might need very different support if they were at different stages of development. The experience of the individual practitioners was also important in this respect. For example, participants reported that some seminars they had attended, especially on business strategies, had been too 'entry-level'. They felt that seminar series should have a mix of entry level and advanced sessions on the same subject.

As discussed in chapter 2, the uneven nature of their work also has a big impact. Organisations often do not have a consistent workload. They therefore need support organisations, networks and other resources to be able to be accessed on an ad-hoc, as-needed basis. Another suggestion was that repeated training sessions and workshops on the same topics were useful, so that if they did not need one form of training at one time, they could attend the session later on when it felt more relevant to their work.

Finally, support must be delivered with the acknowledgement of the serious resource challenges facing many of these organisations. Travel time and cost were barriers for all the organisations we spoke to. They could stop them attending events that might otherwise be useful to their development. Support organisations need to consider this (as is discussed further in the recommendations).

The support from Shared Assets was praised for being responsive to each organisation's specific needs. Some also commented that Shared Assets approach to project support in this programme - making it available as and when needed - was necessary in this context.

### 4.2 Support should be practical and practice-based

Another key idea was that the support offered must focus on practicalities, both in terms of focusing on developing clear strategies and being practitioner-led.



Some participants described attending seminars, webinars and workshops that were useful as thought exercises, but very impractical. They commented that these sessions did not ‘do the work’ or help them make practical decisions. For projects whose chief concern was to gain access to the land, their main interest was in practical knowledge: ‘possibility models’, and strategies for negotiating with landowners and local authorities. Practitioners used these ‘possibility models’ to inspire and mobilise those they worked with, and to convince those in authority of the legitimacy and potential of land-based projects.

Some participants also felt that some support, whilst technically accurate, could be too far removed from practice. For these individuals, capturing the passion of those who had done similar work was more valuable than hearing from ‘experts’ removed from practice. When asked about support they had accessed, a number of practitioners focused more on their experience of hearing from other practitioners than ‘official’ support organisations or programmes. Many had independently arranged to visit projects similar to their own. Considering the scarcity of time and money available to most respondents, informal ad hoc peer support stood out as a highly valued use of their resources. Asking questions of other, more experienced practitioners allowed them to hone in on what was relevant for their project at that time, ‘from furniture choices to business strategies’ as one interviewee described it.

### 4.3 Support should bridge gaps between practitioners and professionals

While being practice-led was considered very important, participants also valued support that bridged gaps with other groups and actors. As discussed in chapter 3, being able to understand, and negotiate with, professionals and landowners was seen as crucial to achieving goals and being perceived as credible.

Trying to bridge gaps between different groups is at the core of most of Shared Assets’ work. Shared Assets’ position between policy, law, landowners and work on the ground was described as ‘hugely useful’ for participants’ projects, and for the sector as a whole. The focus on ‘brokering, agreements and helping conversation between professionals and practitioners’ was ‘amazing’ and ‘very much needed’.

### 4.4 Support should identify and communicate key knowledge

Support organisations were seen as having a key role in ensuring land-based social enterprises have access to the information they need to be successful.

Specific areas where participants had found information provision useful included:

- 🕒 **Policy:** Participants were interested in the practical implications of new policy, for example Localism Act provisions. They suggested that helpful support might include research, guides, or case study series to help clarify and illustrate these issues.
- 🕒 **Digital archiving of events:** Especially due to the uneven nature of the work and the lack of formal resources, there was a demand for digital archiving of events. This would enable organisations who were originally unable to attend events to derive some benefit from them.
- 🕒 **Guides and toolkits for decision-making:** Guidance on practical ways of making decisions was considered useful. Providing these resources was seen as a key role of support organisations.



One caveat was that many respondents were unlikely to pay to access these resources unless they were considered truly invaluable. There was a universal view amongst those interviewed that helpful information should be made freely available for groups to use as and when they pleased. While it was recognised that support organisations may need to derive an income from resources, it is considered important to be realistic about the trade-offs in terms of accessibility that came with charging for information resources.

## 4.5 What does good networking look like?

Helping organisations network was seen as a valuable role for support organisations, however participants also raised a number of issues that must be taken into account.

The following characteristics were considered valuable for networks:

- Helping develop strong local connections. Some participants put particular value on place-based connections as they saw themselves as community based, socially focussed projects. Local networks were also perceived as having direct impacts on accessing resources and progressing projects. Online networking could be a facilitator to eventually organising meetings in person.
- Boosting a project's popularity: Online networks and marketing were seen as good for boosting a project's popularity. In particular, new organisations described using networks to identify and copy successful marketing strategies.
- Helping identify information about other projects that could improve their own project.

And, some common issues with networks were:

- A general concern with networks was the time and resources needed to sustain participation.
- Some argued that networks don't always meet practical needs. While examples were considered useful, there was a risk of network-based support focusing too much on stories about what people had done. Instead, they felt that new projects needed to focus on learning about practical issues such as getting the right legal structure and establishing good processes for decision-making.
- Developing a presence online was felt by some to take up too much time, and was therefore not a priority. There was a general wariness towards investing time and resources in networks, unless they were certain it would be of use to their organisation.
- Even where online networking was valued, it was often the more informal kind. Though some had met at workshops or conferences designed for networking, most had used the Internet to search for similar projects, initiated contact via e-mail and arranged visits of their own accord.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 5.1 Shared Assets and developing the land-based social enterprise sector

Moving from being small, volunteer-led organisations, to being professional enterprises with strong relationships with landowners and other stakeholders, is a real challenge for land-based organisations. The time required for organisational development was also a major challenge when practitioners were heavily occupied by everyday tasks. In this context, Shared Assets' 'as and when' support greatly suited the pace and nature of land-based social enterprise work. It may not always be possible to deliver this kind of support, so it is crucial to think about other ways to make ad hoc support accessible, for example by developing and signposting to online resources.

From each support project, it is important to harvest and archive knowledge for other projects to access in the future. There is also an important need to produce practical knowledge that matures with the sector, rather than spending time and resources repeating elementary work. As projects may encounter similar difficulties at different times, a system for storing and disseminating existing knowledge, whilst providing advanced support and developing new knowledge, could help the sector to develop. We aim both to continue producing material that can help the sector, and also signpost to and publicise other organisations that are doing the same. Our recent [Making Land Work website](#) is an example of this, highlighting some of the most impressive work already going on in the sector.

Shared Assets' position – situated between the world of grassroots projects and that of policy, business and landowning organisations – fits well with the challenges interviewees experienced in their work. Building a repertoire of knowledge from this position, establishing a language and set of 'possibility models', strategies and research for projects to draw upon in the future, will be important to developing the sector as a whole. Building relationships with a diverse range of stakeholders, and ensuring that they can understand and communicate with each other, must remain a key part of our role. Our [2015 policy event](#) was a great example of this, bringing together a great range of individuals and organisations, building new relationships and identifying common ground.

### 5.2 General good practice in supporting land-based social enterprise

Online and face-to-face peer networking around particular interests is something practitioners frequently engage in, but do not want to commit to on a long-term basis. Other practitioners are perceived as the most passionate and pragmatic people to speak to about project development, and the opportunity to ask practical questions of those who have 'been through it' is highly valued.

Many one-on-one relationships are initiated by projects looking for inspiration, advice or powerful case studies and these relationships warranted investment. While organisations are perfectly capable of developing relationships themselves, we see connecting like-minded groups as being core to our work. In particular, our range of contacts amongst diverse land-based social enterprises, means we are able to connect organisations and individuals that might otherwise not realise how useful they can be to each other.



For some respondents, local connections, regardless of activity or interest, were the most important relationships to nurture; they were perceived as having the greatest impact on a project's resources, support and political clout. With place-based work that intends to engage 'the community' and important local stakeholders in one form or another, local support and action is invaluable. Interviewees expressed the importance of building local support, legitimacy and 'community' around place, for example by garnering support from local authorities or involving vulnerable, isolated groups. As an organisation with a national focus, this project has reminded us that it is equally important to support the local.

In thinking about developing the support available to land-based social enterprises, it is important to consider how resources can be helpful to different places and communities. We want to continue developing our understanding of the common issues across the range of approaches to land-based social enterprise. However, it will also be crucial to think about how and when to base support on shared issues around land, and when to emphasise the power of local connections and how to best support practitioners in their development.