

A balancing act

Delivering Unlimited...

A case study in partnership working



UNLIMITED...

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We've had some complex discussions but we really listened to each other and have tried to see things from different perspectives and accommodate our different views. This has helped us make fair and strategic decisions and develop better solutions.

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Passionately Unlimited

This is not about being a tribe in a ghetto. This is work we all passionately believe in, we are about creating opportunities for disabled artists, getting them out there and telling their stories.

Unlimited leadership team



As we sit in his light filled corner office Tony explains the origins of Unlimited and how he knew from the first small scale commissions that it was something that could develop into a programme the scale of which might not once have been imagined for disabled artists.

“This all started with £25,000 and four commissions in 2009. We knew at the time it was scalable. We wanted it to mushroom and be multi-artform. We wanted it to spread and be high quality.” Tony Heaton, Chief Executive, Shape Arts

This commitment is spoken genuinely with one voice by Tony Heaton (Chief Executive, Shape Arts), Manick Govinda (Head of Artists’ Advisory Services, Artsadmin), and Jo Verrent (Senior Producer), the leadership team of Unlimited and is very much reflected in the work that has been delivered and the values of the delivery team as a whole.

“This is not about being a tribe in a ghetto. This is work we all passionately believe in, we are about creating opportunities for disabled artists, getting them out there and telling their stories. “

Unlimited leadership team

Now moving into its third iteration Unlimited aims ‘to embed work by disabled artists within the UK cultural sector, reach new audiences and shift perceptions of disabled people.’ Unlimited II (2014 – 2016) was funded by

Arts Council England, Arts Council Wales, Creative Scotland and the Spirit of 2012 Trust.

It consists of two main strands:

- **Unlimited:** which offers talented disabled artists funds and mentoring support to develop, produce and show ambitious work. The Unlimited commissions programme is linked with biennial festivals in London at the Southbank Centre (2014 and 2016) and Glasgow’s Tramway (2016), providing the opportunity for artists to showcase their work across the country to national and international delegates
- **Unlimited impact:** supported by Spirit of 2012, Unlimited Impact focuses on developing and inspiring the next generation of young disabled people passionate about making change through the arts; extending Unlimited’s reach by supporting venues across the country to successfully programme ambitious and high quality work by disabled artists; and deepening discussion and debate around work by disabled artists

Becoming Unlimited: willing partners

...if you untie a knotted rope...the rope will retain kinks and bends and will want, given the chance, to curl up into similar conformations as before.

Ingold, T. (2015)

In other words, the knot never forgets.



At the point that the Arts Council announced the £1.5m funding for Unlimited II Artsadmin and Shape were considering submitting independent applications. However, a number of factors caused pause for thought, such as the scale of the programme, the need for a breadth of expertise, and how to demonstrate the highest likelihood of success. It seems that almost simultaneously Artsadmin and Shape began to consider who an appropriate project partner might be.

Following a range of conversations, including input from the Arts Council, Shape approached Artsadmin to see if a partnership might be possible. Both organisations had some knowledge of each other and respected the work of one another; they had also both been involved in 2012. Having confirmed the partnership it was agreed that a strong and dynamic Producer to co-ordinate the programme was needed. Tony suggested Jo Verrent and while she was not known directly to Artsadmin Manick and the team were willing to take a risk and accept Tony's recommendation. The Unlimited triumvirate was formed.

There followed a period of intense activity as this leadership team shaped the bid and completed the application. The newly formed leadership team worked in fine detail on the application; it is described as a forensic process that created more of a 'blueprint' than a grant application.

"We set out to trust each other. The process and the structure then builds trust. We knew what was in it for all of us and it was all very equitable.

It was exciting and frantic but there was a great sense of team spirit.

It was a really detailed application because we knew the risks. More of a workplan with a lot of forward planning. It was then about following through and we quickly established a rigid meeting structure with the Arts Council. "

Unlimited Leadership Team

The turnaround from the announcement that the partnership application had been successful to the Unlimited launch was very tight, with the funding announced in the October and the launch event at Tate Modern at the beginning of December 2013. This meant that the team had to trust each other to deliver and that some of the details of working together would need to be created through doing rather than forward planning everything.

An 'Unlimited Joint Partnership Agreement,' that set out the key elements of the working arrangements, was signed by both organisations in November 2013. It established Shape as the accountable body and confirmed the Senior Producer as an associate partner.



Partnership working is a constant evolution.

Ecorys , 2015: 11



The role of the Senior Producer was outlined in a Service Providers Agreement with the Joint Delivery Partners.

The structure of the partnership has remained relatively stable across the period of Unlimited II but some of the roles have changed or been refined as the programme developed. Roles were defined at both organisational and individual levels and as far as possible the distribution of responsibilities was done on an equitable basis.

As part of the process the ‘golden rule’ was established.

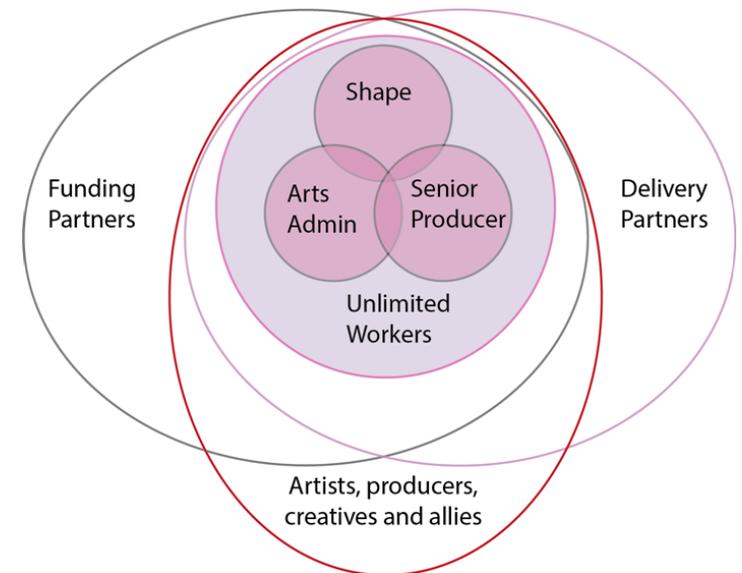
“When working as a leadership team of three at least two out of the three have to agree. Everyone then accepts the decision and moves on. This has helped create checks and balances.”

Unlimited programme delivery has been a cyclical process with periods of planning, development and delivery. This has meant that the partnership has had to adapt to peaks and troughs of delivery, adjusting capacity and focus as appropriate. It has also meant that the partnership has constantly re-evaluated where its strengths are at a given point. Several participants talked about there being periods of feeling stretched but that when this is known there have been open conversations about workload.

While it is not unusual to have a Producer as part of a partnership team it is less usual to have that individual as an equal partner in the leadership team. This structure has

ensured that governance of the programme is both strategic and close to the operational delivery. The Senior Producer is seen as the driving force for Unlimited and while she line manages the ‘Workers’ she also sits independently of the organisations bringing a new perspective and approach. The overall structure appears to be a series of nested partnerships (Figure 1) with the leadership team at the core supported by the delivery team. While it is the core Unlimited team partnership that forms the focus of this case study the programme includes a series of wider partnerships with the funding partners, delivery partners, the artists and a range of other creatives.

Figure 1 The nested partnerships of Unlimited





The Unlimited Team is aware of the different organisational cultures at Shape and Artsadmin, and has seen this as a strength rather than a challenge. It has given team members the opportunity to experience different ways of working and to see their relative advantages and disadvantages. Shape is seen as being a little more structured with formal processes whereas Artsadmin is regarded as informal with more autonomous working. Neither was described as being better or worse than the other by any of the team members, they simply see them as different with both together becoming more than the sum of their parts.

Managed risk taking has been a key ingredient of the Unlimited partnership mix. This has included taking on a programme of this scale, working with new partners (individuals and organisations), managing the levels of expectation, handling differences of opinion and delivering work of high quality. These risks seem to have been understood from the outset and once the partners were committed they have worked to address them collectively. It is noteworthy that the leadership team has felt able to agree to disagree and that differences of opinion have been aired and heard rather than suppressed as can be the case in partnership working.

Sharing, learning, growing: equal partners

Participants were asked to consider a range of characteristics related to the Unlimited partnership, from the point when they joined to now. The responses clearly show a perception of a dynamic partnership developing over time (Figure 2).

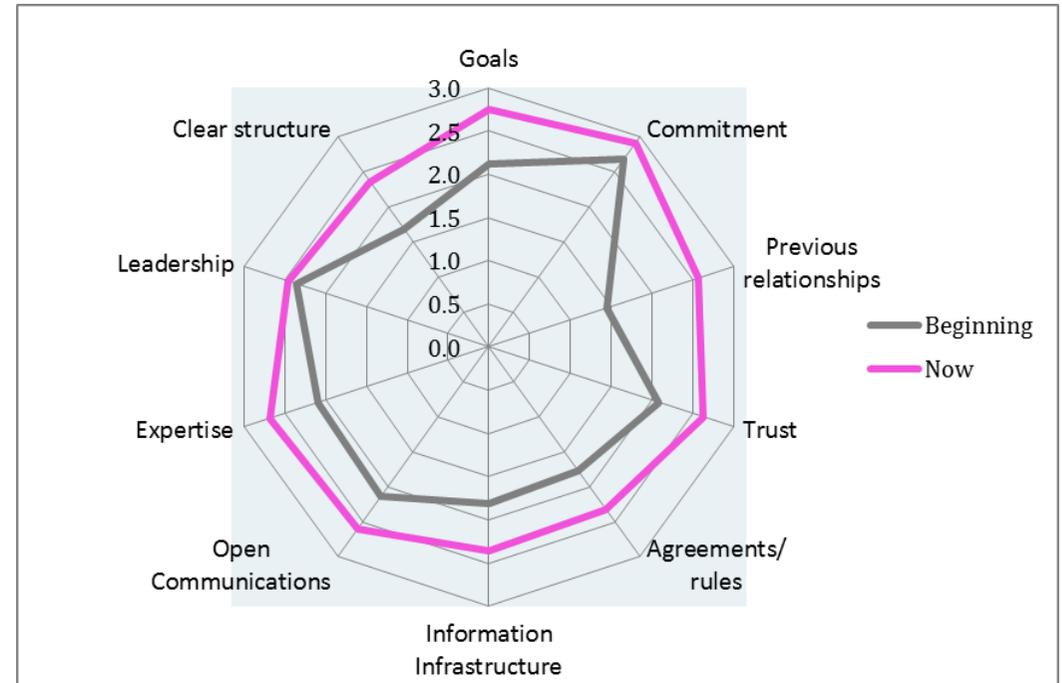
Understandably in the early stages the relationships were very new and untested but there is a now a sense that the partners have a better understanding of each other. All the team are keen for this to continue and noted that the opportunity to attend other events that are not necessarily Unlimited related at each of the organisations is welcomed. Working practices around rules, communications and information sharing are all perceived to have developed.

Commitment to Unlimited has scored consistently well and has never been questioned; it has been described as the glue that has bound the partnership together. Understanding of the Unlimited goals and the clarity of the structure are also perceived to have improved over time. Leadership and expertise are both perceived to be strong.

Trust building has obviously been an important part of the process and was a potential challenge for the partnership for a number of reasons:

- The timescale for moving from the successful funding bid to delivery was very short
- Some of the team members had not worked together before
- The partners are geographically spread
- Unlimited was being created as a separate 'project or virtual working space'
- People were being required to work across organisational boundaries in what one team member described as a 'composite team'

Figure 2 Unlimited Team members perceptions of when they joined the programme to August 2016



To build a climate and culture of trust requires reciprocity and that means that one partner usually has to give trust before it is clear whether it is warranted. Within organisations the process of trust building generally happens over a period of time as those involved come to know each other better. However, the Unlimited partners entered into something that is known as 'swift trust,' (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996) it is a reasonably recent concept used mainly in relation to project, temporary or virtual teams.

If we are not learning from each other then what is the point?

Unlimited team member



Jo's funny, she's always asking 'what have we learnt from that.' We have to fill in a lessons learnt sheet now.

Unlimited team member

"It displaces the usual individual anxieties of vulnerability, uncertainty, and risk that are associated with normal trust development in favor of a collective desire to accomplish team goals... swift-trust 'is less about relating than doing'."

(Berthold, 2015: 20)

A number of factors have been employed by Unlimited partners to develop swift trust:

- Recognizing each other's reputation and expertise, and attributing skills and competencies
- Constant attention to clarity of roles and tasks
- Competent, reliable and flexible leadership (particularly embodied in the Senior Producer)

Shared learning and knowledge has also been an important part of ensuring the partnership has worked effectively and efficiently. Explicit knowledge has been shared through formal training (workshops, briefings and traineeships), the meetings structures and the communications tools (Dropbox and Trello). Implicit knowledge has been shared through working together, which draws out individual knowledge and points of reflection such as the 'Lessons Learnt' sheets.

Tacit knowledge has also been shared through team members observing the work of others, the Senior

Producer in particular. Unlimited has involved social as well as individual learning.

"Learning is a dynamic process that manifests itself in the continuously changing nature of organisations."

(Bennet & Bennet, 2008)

In addition to the above characteristics a number of points were raised by the Unlimited team in terms of helping the partnership develop and mature:

- The 'buzz': the buzz around Unlimited has drawn people in and built commitment. This was perceived to be linked to the scale of ambition of the programme
- Pride: Everyone spoke of being proud of what Unlimited is delivering and the impact it is having
- Fairness: a value driven approach focused on transparency, equity and parity
- Listening: Listening for understanding and allowing people to share views and disagree. Most importantly team members have felt able to listen and change their minds
- Constant improvement: Checks and balances being built into the processes and changes made where necessary



- Humour: there is a good sense of team spirit and fun at both the social and task levels

As with all complex projects there has been light and shade and while team members are hugely positive about the experience overall, challenges have been highlighted around communications, role clarity and capacity. Several participants felt that in terms of leadership and trust their expectations were not being met, which highlights the delicate balance of a programme with strong ethics and values.

The issues seem to be widely known across the team and have been addressed where possible. Two particular areas have been mentioned, one in relation to a problem with a commission and one around raising Unlimited's presence within mainstream media. These seem to have been discussed openly and while opinions may have differed about their resolution the partners have been working together to find appropriate solutions.

Achieving a balancing act

Spend time on developing the relationship and the collaboration in addition to doing the work. A partnership will have some form of project or output to deliver, but often the informal interactions are the things that remain with partners after the project has been completed. It's also that personal interaction that allows successful partners to collaborate again in the future, and to spot new opportunities with potential to take the partnership forward or make it sustainable.

AHRC, Partnership Working in the Arts & Humanities, 2013

In discussing the impact of working in partnership the team have described having to find a balance in a number of areas:

- Maintaining organisational identities while building a strong profile and brand for Unlimited
- Managing what some have described as the 'Juggernaut' of Unlimited alongside other commitments
- Unlimited being a different proportion of the whole for both organisations so needing to balance the impact between Artsadmin and Shape
- Working across organisational cultures and processes
- Finding a balance of workloads and time commitments
- Keeping everyone informed but not overwhelmed
- Determining how much to provide for team members and how much they can work on autonomously
- The balance of managing chaos and order. Providing structure through meeting structures, online tools and so on at the same time as keeping things flexible and responsive

This balancing act has been achieved through ongoing discussions, continuously trying to improve processes and communicating as well as possible. It has also been managed by facing up to some of the dilemmas rather than trying to ignore them and hoping they will resolve themselves.

Three questions have informed the reflections on this case study:

1. How does our partnership compare?
2. What opportunities has the partnership enabled? (We hope this question will be of interest to others considering partnership working)
3. Where does our partnership go from here?

How does our partnership compare?

Until recently there has been little formal research into partnership work in the cultural sector. Last year King's College London (KCL) produced 'The Art of Partnering' (King's College London, 2015) and this includes a number of case studies of cultural organisations.

We all have our place and we are not in competition with each other. It's fantastic!

Unlimited team member



Responses to the KCL partnerships survey (94 respondents) showed the following in relation to partnership working:

- 95% of respondents reported agreeing joint objectives
- 70% reported having a written agreement
- 57% had conducted an evaluation

This suggests that Unlimited has followed a similar pattern to others in terms of structuring the partnership. The KCL research also highlighted three core principles for successful partnerships:

1. Equity—because it builds genuine respect for the added value each party brings;
2. Transparency—because it engenders trust between partners and leads to greater willingness to innovate and take risks; and
3. Mutual benefit—because it leads to deeper engagement and a greater likelihood of sustainability

These are principles that will be very familiar to the Unlimited team and have been central to developing its own model of partnership working. Compared to 'Creative People and Places' (CPP), and other consortium based partnership working evaluated by Alchemy,

Unlimited is unusual in the speed that the partnership was established and started delivering effectively. The evaluation of CPP consortium working noted:

Without exception, the process of consortium development has been slow and often frustratingly slow. (Bunting & Fleming, 2015: 10)

The speed that the Unlimited partnership gelled was in part enforced by the necessity to deliver to the funding timetable (CPP consortia also tend to be larger), but nonetheless is a significant achievement and not necessarily the usual experience in terms of partnership building.

CPP consortia do share some similarities with Unlimited in terms of the levels of knowledge exchange and peer learning; they particularly noted how diverse skills and perspectives were rubbing off on each other. (Bunting & Fleming, 2015: 15) A benefit that has also been recognised by the Unlimited partners.

The CPP Meta evaluation highlighted that successful partnerships required generosity and a spirit of engagement. (Ecorys, 2015: 11) There is no question this has been present in the Unlimited partnership.

The Unlimited partnership has achieved what is known as ambidexterity, that is, in working together



the partners have been able to balance efficiency with innovation, being able to exploit existing resources and expertise at the same time as exploring new ways of doing things. The working relationships have had enough flexibility to be able to adapt as needed. This has in part been supported by bringing together the two cultures of Shape and Artsadmin. Team members also highlighted the importance of the Senior Producer role in terms of being the driving force; structuring the processes and working practices; providing independent advice, information and guidance; being flexible; and placing trust in others to deliver.

What opportunities has the partnership enabled?

Team members have described a range of opportunities that the partnership has enabled:

- It achieved successful funding applications to both Unlimited II and III
- It has solidified relationships across two organisations and with an independent Producer that will continue beyond Unlimited
- The process has enabled the sharing of practice, knowledge, experiences and networks that would not have happened otherwise

- Allowing the team to work on a larger scale, higher profile project than might otherwise have been possible
- Connecting with a wider partners group
- Raising the status and awareness of each other
- Providing the capacity to take risks that might not otherwise have happened
- Providing a benchmark for the development of future partnerships & collaborations
- Establishing a desire for the impacts of Unlimited to become integrated into wider organisational practices

Into Unlimited III

There is a great deal to celebrate in the achievements of the Unlimited partnership and the partners are managing a complex balancing act well. There are a number of things the Unlimited partnership might think about going forward:

- As you continue to strengthen as a group it can be more difficult for newcomers to join – remember to build in induction processes for new team members (several current team members mentioned it would have been helpful to have had a more robust induction)



- Continue to review and revise your processes and approaches to ensure they stay fit for purpose. There is an ethos of continuous improvement that is recognised by team members, and clarity of communication is something everyone is keen to achieve
- Making use of your critical friends, those people in both organisations who are not intimately involved with the day to day of Unlimited. They can help keep your insights fresh
- Trying to find more social time and opportunities to crossover between the organisations, several team members talked about the value of being invited to each other's events and social gatherings outside of the Unlimited bubble
- Integrating with other organisational work; there is an eagerness to see the impact of Unlimited continue to spread within both organisations

Overall, Unlimited is working successfully as a partnership. The partners have enough connections to share some common ground and methods but are also sufficiently different to create new perspectives and approaches.

It is a partnership that is still evolving and team members are reflecting on and adapting their joint working as Unlimited develops. What is striking about this partnership is the relative openness of communications (accepting you will never achieve 100% openness), the non-judgemental approach to managing issues, the maturity to cope with disagreement and the flexibility for people to change their minds.

“When I asked a team member what sort of dinner guest Unlimited might make I was told that, “‘Unlimited’ would be interesting and exciting – maybe a bit in-your-face but a fun guest! A talkative guest!”

Appendices

Appendix One: Methodology and approach

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the members of the Unlimited team who have given time and energy to share their insights, ideas and experiences with me. Particular thanks to Jo Verrent for providing additional information and liaising with the team on my behalf.

Images

The images included in the case study have been selected by some of the Unlimited team. They are intended to show the things that come to mind when the team think about Unlimited.

This report was produced by Dawn Langley (Alchemy Research & Consultancy) and uses an interpretative methodology based on a qualitative case study approach. It was commissioned by the Unlimited partners to support a deeper understanding of their partnership working, to share lessons learnt and to inform the future of Unlimited .

Members of the Unlimited team were interviewed in July and August 2016, with interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted using a Biographic Narrative Interviewing Method, which involves using a single opening question:

“Tell me about your experience of Unlimited since you have been involved.”

Participants are then invited to start wherever they like, to go wherever they like without interruption. Follow up questions are then drawn from their personal narratives. This approach is designed to gain an understanding of individual experiences and ensures the interviewer does not anticipate issues of importance through a predetermined set of questions. Interviews were conducted either face to face or via online conferencing. One respondent replied by e-mail.

Interviewees were also invited to rank a number of partnership working characteristics and discuss their scoring.

The interviews were analysed using thematic coding. Themes mentioned at least three times by participants were collated and used as the basis for the written case study.

Appendix Two: Case study participants

Shape Arts

Tony Heaton

CEO

Jeff Rowlings

Head of Programme

Sally Yarwood

Director of finance and administration

Shape Core Unlimited delivery team

Fiona Slater

Programme Coordinator

Sara Dziadik

Programme Coordinator

Artsadmin

Manick Govinda

Head of Artists' Advisory Services

Gill Lloyd

Co-Director

Jen Tomkins

Head of Marketing & Dev

Artsadmin Core Unlimited delivery team

Clara Giraud

Project Manager

Selma Wilcocks

Marketing Officer

Associate Partner

Jo Verrent

Senior Producer

Arts Council England

Claire Saddleton

Senior Relationship Manager - Theatre

Appendix Three: The partners

Artsadmin

Founded in 1979 Artsadmin was created to provide producing and administrative support to independent artists and companies. It has a wide portfolio of activity from space hire and catering to projects and publications. In 2014/15 it had a turnover of £2.9m and a staffing of 25 people (average full time equivalent). Artsadmin is funded as a National Portfolio (NPO) organisation by Arts Council England.

Shape

Shape's is working towards an inspiring and inclusive arts sector, accessible to all. It was created in 1976 and is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. Shape develops, support and promotes disabled artists. It also works with the wider cultural sector to promote greater accessibility and inclusion In 2014/15 Shape had a turnover of £1.6m and a staff complement of 17.5 (average full time equivalent). Shape is also an NPO.

Jo Verrent, (Unlimited Senior Producer and Associate Partner) Solopreneur and freelance producer

Jo works as a diversity trainer, consultant, project manager and is passionate about what she does. She works as an individual freelancer as well as in a wide range of associate partnerships. She created the Sync programme with Sarah Pickthall and is increasingly involved in international collaborations.

The funding partners

Unlimited 1, II and II are supported by Arts Council England, Arts Council Wales, Creative Scotland, The British Council, and Spirit of 2012

Partners

Organisational partners include DadaFest , DAO, Tramway and Southbank Centre. Partners also include the artists/projects commissioned for Unlimited II

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