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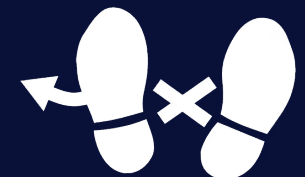
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PART 1:

# INTRODUCTION

**At New Citizen Project we believe that membership is special.**

At a time when we have ever more fleeting interactions and shorter attention spans, there is unique value in the things we commit to. Over the course of 10 years of working with membership organisations, we have seen that membership has the potential to shape the identity of both organisations and members, to provide connection and a sense of belonging, to offer care and cultivation for organisations that are prepared to work meaningfully with their members. And that the organisations who understand and foster these unique features of membership see the benefits of increased loyalty, retention and brand advocacy.

But we have also seen that the unique value of membership is often not realised; reduced to a revenue stream that can sit apart from organisational strategy and innovation. And so, in March of last year we brought together four membership organisations: **British Rowing**, **giffgaff**, **Royal Botanic Gardens Kew** and **National Trust** in a programme of **collaborative innovation**. While different in purpose, sector and scale, each one was united in feeling that more needed to be done to make the most of their memberships for both members and the organisations.

Over 8 months, we explored the question:

**How can cultivating membership as a purposeful and participatory relationship make organisations stronger and more impactful?**

**This process has underlined that making the most of membership is as much about bringing colleagues and the organisation with us as it is about reimagining how we work with members.**

Realising membership's unique value can take a significant internal rewiring of how organisations think of and work with members. It's a rewiring that requires building the capacity to hold different types of conversations with members and to work in more iterative ways that build the case for why this matters.

What follows is a summary of the underlying thinking behind the programme, our learning, and ten practical steps to start making the most of membership.



# THE CHALLENGE FOR MEMBERSHIP

## **There is conventional wisdom that treats membership as a consumer product.**

This is based on assumptions that members primarily seek 'value for money' and generally don't care enough to step up and get involved in taking action or making decisions. Instead, the organisation delivers the mission *for* the members, and the members simply pay for it.

When a small core of members do try to get involved in decision-making, they often end up being treated as stakeholders to be 'managed'. There can be a pervasive sense of 'we know what they'll say' and an expectation of criticism to defend against, rather than harnessing the care and commitment that often sits behind member 'complaints'.

What's more, when we perceive of and communicate membership as a product or service to deliver, members can be kept in a Consumer box with little agency *other* than to feedback or complain.

**Membership organisations need income. But in the long run, this product-driven way of thinking hurts them.**

Purely transactional relationships miss the opportunity to build more meaningful relationships with members, weakening retention - if members don't use the perks right away, they don't renew. (1)

Providing member benefits can become an industry in itself, diverting resources away from an organisation's core mission or purpose. In some cases, organisations can forget why they even had members in the first place: all the energy goes on sustaining the membership base, rather than on mobilising it in pursuit of a shared mission.

And with all the energy going into 'managing membership', it can become siloed, or at worst a backwater, sitting apart from the heart of strategy and innovation.

1 <https://getlucidity.com/strategy-resources/5-reasons-members-leave-their-professional-association/>

## WHAT WE MEAN BY

# MAKING THE MOST OF MEMBERSHIP

**At the heart of this programme is the idea of membership as a relationship to cultivate**, rather than a product to sell or a service to deliver. In practice, this means treating members as **Citizens** - creative, caring and collaborative, and open to participating in a shared purpose - rather than transactional Consumers.

	FROM	TO
<b>MEMBERS</b>	CONSUMERS	CITIZENS
<b>MEMBERSHIP</b>	PRODUCT	RELATIONSHIP
<b>MOTIVATION</b>	BUYING FROM	BUYING IN
<b>VALUE PROPOSITION</b>	TRANSACTIONAL	TRANSACTIONAL + EMOTIONAL
<b>MODE</b>	FOR	WITH
<b>ROLE</b>	SERVE	FACILITATE

When we start to see membership as a purposeful and participatory relationship, it prompts us to think differently about how we communicate what it is to be a member, how we work with members, and what we want membership to offer beyond transactional benefits alone.

It is the basis for starting to unlock the unique features of membership, including:

**MEMBERSHIP'S ABILITY TO DRIVE BOTH A SHARED AND PERSONAL SENSE OF PURPOSE.**

**THE CHANCE FOR CONNECTION WITH OTHERS AND A SENSE OF BELONGING.**

**MEMBERS' PROPENSITY TO CARE ABOUT THE ORGANISATION BEHIND THE PURPOSE AND WILLINGNESS TO GIVE THEIR TIME, ENERGY AND MONEY TO SUPPORT IT.**

These qualities bring real value for both members and organisations. They encourage greater advocacy and a willingness not just to back finished campaigns or products, but to help shape them from the start.

And they also strengthen the financial side of membership: people who feel genuinely aligned with a shared mission, and who feel they belong, are more likely to stay - and more likely to contribute their money, time, ideas and support. (2)

2 <https://blog.bondbrandloyalty.com/membership-mindset-your-gateway-to-profitability-emotional-loyalty>

# THE JOURNEY TOWARDS PARTICIPATORY MEMBERSHIP AT CO-OP



**Over a ten-year period, The Co-operative Group has been making a shift to cultivating membership as a purposeful and participatory relationship, which is now paying dividends.** Their journey is an example of starting small, testing and learning and, above all, demonstrating the value that members can bring.

Starting from a predominantly transactional membership, which copied retail category norms, Co-op set out to reconnect with their values and strengthen the relationship with members through the establishment of a dedicated member participation team, to create value for Co-op and its members through authentic **everyday participation** opportunities.

For a long time, member participation was perceived by the wider Co-op as something of an indulgent side project; a nice-to-have, rather than a necessary part of building the business. So the member participation team set about making the case for membership as a relationship, demonstrating its value and growing support amongst colleagues in different areas of the Co-op.

They told a compelling story of member participation, defining it by category - 'learning', 'choosing', 'shaping' and 'taking part', to help colleagues to understand and navigate what was (and wasn't) participation.

They helped colleagues to understand the value that strong member relationships can bring beyond the purely economic, highlighting the

potential for members to drive social value in communities, or to strengthen perceptions of the Co-op movement as a whole. And they set about measuring everything; gathering evidence to prove the value created.

**From a few hundred engagements at the beginning of this journey, they recorded over 1.3 million engagements in 2025, and were able to identify a correlation between high levels of engagement and high spend with the Co-op.**

Now the team works across each department and area of Co-op to drive member closeness through participation. In 2025 their membership base had grown to 6.1 million, with a 66% increase in members aged 25 or under.

PART 2:

# SUMMARY OF THE PROGRAMME

**Making the Most of Membership, a collaborative innovation programme, took place over 8 months in 2025.** Drawing on New Citizen Project's 2015 collaborative innovation project and resulting publication *The Future of Membership*, we designed the programme around our original three principles of participatory membership:

## PURPOSE

bring members together around a clear mission and belief

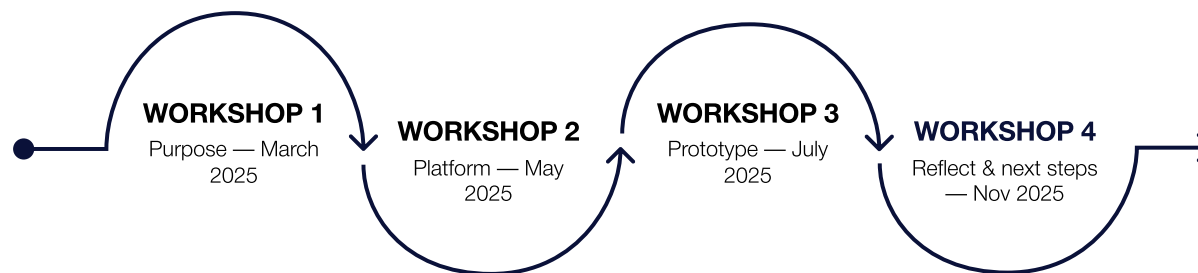
## PLATFORM

find ways to work *with* members, not just *for* them

## PROTOTYPE

build energy by experimenting

The workshops were interspersed with **one-to-one coaching** calls, **'lunch & learn'** sessions with key sector thinkers, and **action learning sets**, an opportunity for peer-support that we know there is appetite to continue. The programme formally ended in December with a **Sharing Session** hosted by NCP, where participants presented an overview of the process, its lessons, and a future-facing plan to their senior colleagues - those whose buy-in would be vital to keep this work moving forward.



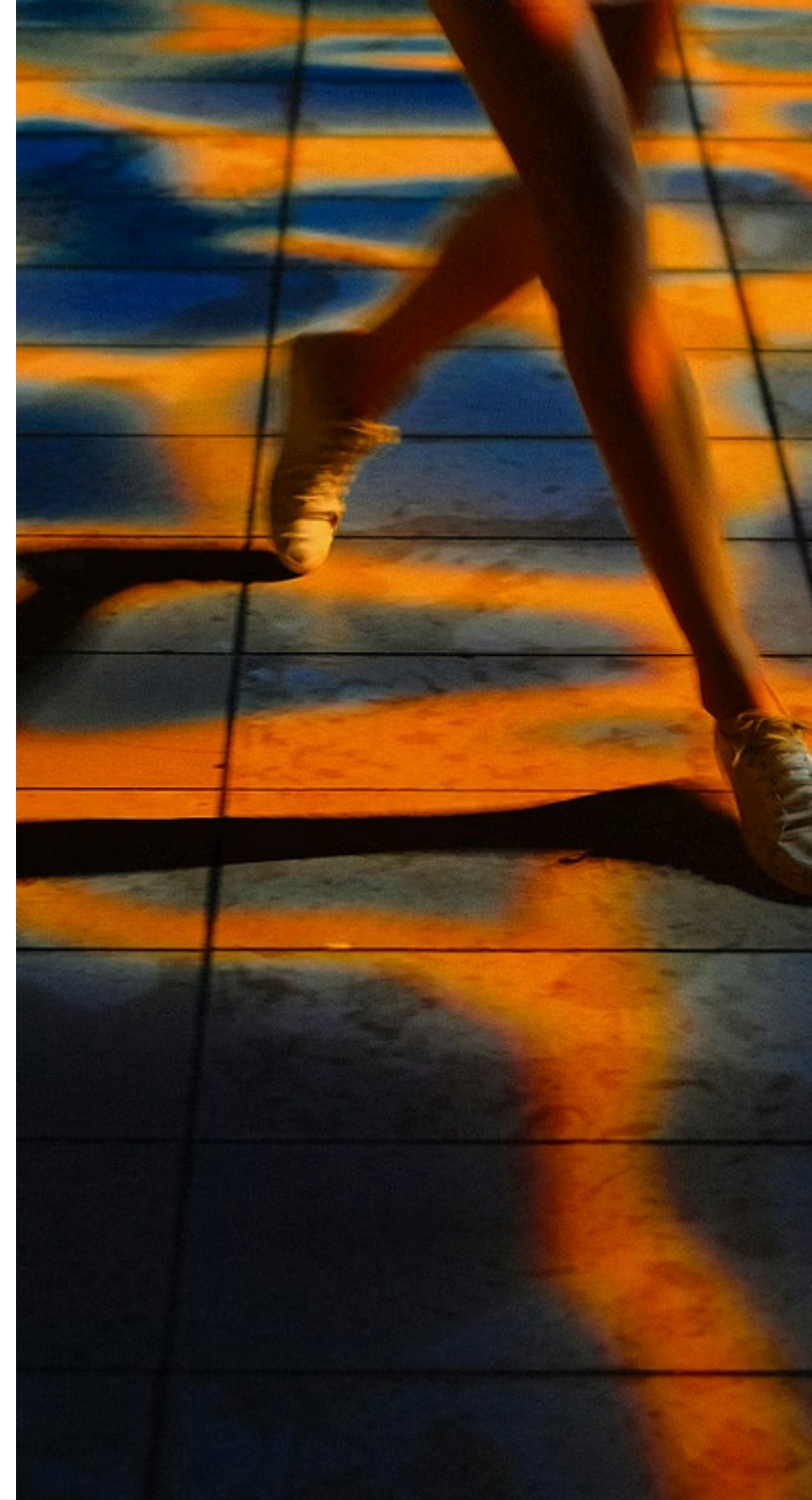
# giffgaff

Back in 2009, giffgaff set out to challenge the status quo in telecoms. With a mindset rooted in **mutuality**, we tore up the rule book in pursuit of creating a mobile service provider that people loved.

giffgaff has been proud to **share ownership** of the challenges of delivering better mobile and broadband, which we launched in 2025, with our members. Over the years, our community has been central to every aspect of giffgaff's success. From product development and app design to providing hundreds of helpful ideas and countless new referrals, **members have shaped the business** from the inside out. It's helped drive improvements that benefit members directly, while also strengthening our commercial performance.

We got involved in the programme because it closely aligned with a question we were already asking ourselves as a growing, established organisation: ***how do we ensure that membership continues to be a meaningful, purposeful and genuinely mutual relationship in today's world?***

The programme offered a valuable opportunity to step back and explore how we might more fully realise the unique potential of our membership not just as a revenue model, but as a source of **shared purpose, participation, loyalty and long-term value** for both members and the organisation. For us, it's about renewing our founding principle of mutuality for a new generation of members.





Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew is a world-leading science, horticulture, conservation and education charity. Our mission is to understand and protect plants and fungi for the wellbeing of people and the future of all life on earth. We have a loyal membership base centred around our two sites of Kew Gardens and Wakehurst.

Our team came into the programme with ambitious targets for **membership growth and acquisition**, and at a time when our new brand platform had just been launched.

*The programme was an opportunity to explore membership's role in delivering the new brand purpose, inspiring our member base to get actively involved, and how that might strengthen and deepen relationships with our members, leading to better engagement, loyalty and ultimately retention.*

We hoped that the programme might also help us **demonstrate the value of membership** to the wider organisation and provide evidence showing how involving our members was a worthwhile endeavour that could shift the dial on retention and build loyalty.



National Trust is the **third largest membership organisation** in the UK with over 5.38 million members. A new strategy, launched in 2025, identifies members as a '**unique force**' in creating a larger movement for conservation by helping inspire 5 million more people to care and take action, by becoming volunteers, advocates or donating funds by 2035.

We came into the programme out of a sense that NT membership could do more to respond to the **different interests of members** and to empower **action and connection** between members themselves. We wanted to explore opportunities to build out a more personalised, less homogenous experience of membership, recognising that people who join NT do so for a variety of reasons **connected to the overall purpose** of the organisation but that this wasn't always recognised internally.

*The programme took place at a time of a significant restructure designed to re-align the organisation to effectively deliver its new strategy. This unfortunately meant the team had to step back from active participation in the programme and were not able to experiment in the way they'd hoped to at the start. Their participation has nevertheless helped shape the learnings shared in this report.*



BRITISHROWING

British Rowing, the governing body for the sport, has a membership of both individual participants (rowers, coxes, coaches, umpires etc.) and also affiliation with clubs and competition organisers who deliver the sport. Membership is an **essential source of unrestricted income** for the organisation.

Central to membership has been racing licenses and insurance cover that means, for some, membership feels like a **'tax on the sport'** - a necessary tickbox to getting on the water.

***We came into the programme to explore how we can move away from this sentiment of a 'tax' to a state whereby members feel like they are part of something bigger and more meaningful.***

We wanted to see if we could create a **connection** to our community and get them to understand more about what we do for the sport as the NGB so they can see how they fit into this ecosystem, what part they play and **work with them** to evolve their membership experience and the value proposition.

# WHAT NEW CITIZEN PROJECT LEARNT

**Much of the programme focussed on thinking about membership from the outside-in: looking at how organisations currently work with members and generating initial ideas for involving them more. Equally important, however, is changing membership from the inside out: bringing colleagues into the conversation and starting to change the internal idea of what membership can be.**

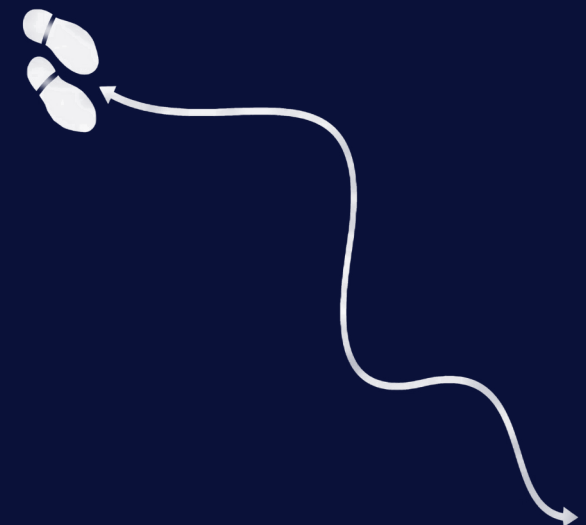
Moving membership to a more purposeful and participatory relationship often requires a significant internal change; it means building understanding and belief in the benefits of a new or enhanced relationship with members.

This kind of change doesn't happen overnight. It's made harder when an organisation is going through wider restructuring or facing financial pressure - as was the case for three of the four organisations in the programme. Many participants found it difficult to take risks with new approaches or to carve out time for the change they wanted to make.

But their progress shows - and the experience of organisations like Co-op reinforces - that even in challenging times, it *is* possible to re-centre membership.

**Doing so can strengthen both the organisation and its connection with the people it exists to support.**

**CLEARER THAN EVER IS THE IMPORTANCE OF...**





## CREATING THE STORY FROM HERE

For the organisations in the programme, membership had slipped into established patterns that weren't fully realising its potential. For some it wasn't getting much thought beyond maintaining the status quo. Others were considering how membership could remain relevant as their organisation evolved and changed. **All wanted to explore how developing a new story or next chapter could help to re-centre and strengthen membership.**

This starts by looking afresh at membership beyond the usual KPIs and reflecting on how it's perceived inside and outside the organisation. From there, it becomes possible to imagine what a more purposeful, participatory relationship with members could look like. And ultimately to create a clear, shared sense of what we want to move away from, and what we want to move towards.

**Part of unlocking the potential of membership is building momentum, creating a sense of possibility and helping people see how much more membership could offer both the organisation and the members themselves.**



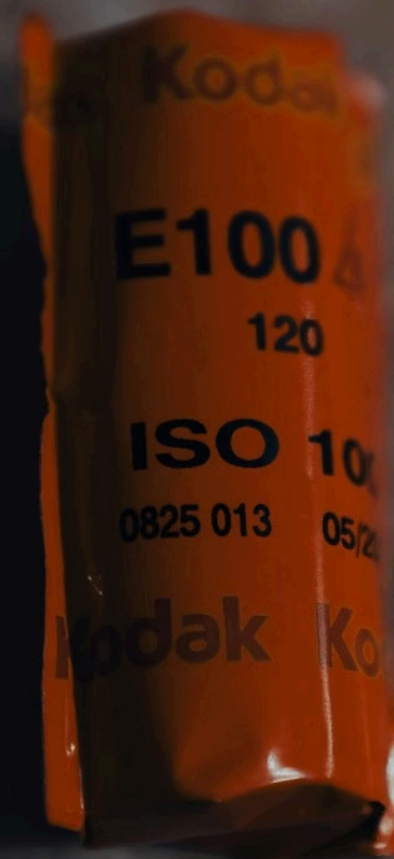
## MEASURING MORE OF MEMBERSHIP

Participants spoke about the drumbeat of quarterly targets and how restrictive that can be to innovation within membership. The old saying '*what we measure, we maximise*' is certainly true in membership. We will always need to know acquisition and retention rates. **But large parts of the picture, and potential value of membership, are missed by not measuring the more relational qualities of membership and showing how they can positively impact the wider goals of the organisation:**

- How feeling connection to a shared mission can strengthen advocacy.
- How a sense of belonging can strengthen retention and promotion.
- How greater participation in membership can strengthen other forms of giving, such as fundraising.

These qualities take time to build, but they can strengthen an organisation in ways that go well beyond short-term numbers. By having a more rounded understanding of what we want membership to achieve, and by finding ways to measure those things, we can start to grow them with more intent.

**Over time, as organisations like Co-op have shown, deeper member relationships can translate into stronger organisational impact.**





## BUILDING THE CASE BY DOING

For many organisations, moving from the current story of membership to investing in the capacity-building needed for a more purposeful and participatory membership can feel like too big a leap. Waiting for the 'perfect moment' or the 'perfect case study' can stall progress.

**Instead, small steps start to build the case from the ground up.** Participants talked about the value of 'going where the energy is'; finding existing projects or conversations where members could naturally be brought back into the centre.

These small experiments don't replace the need for a long-term strategy, but they do help colleagues experience what participatory membership can feel like, test approaches, and show early evidence of the benefits.

**Bit by bit, this builds confidence, skills, and momentum - and helps shape a more ambitious plan over time.**



# WHAT THE PARTICIPANTS LEARNT

## GIFFGAFF

One of the biggest things the programme gave us was **clarity**. We came in with a gut feel that we wanted to do more with membership, but the programme helped us move from that general sense of **possibility** to a **much clearer diagnosis** and a stronger way to **explain the case for change** - both internally and externally.

*It also really re-energised conversations around our founding value of mutuality. There's a lot of pride in this across the business, but the programme helped us look more closely at how that value is actually showing up for members today, and how it needs to evolve as we grow.*

We had to be honest with ourselves about another big challenge too: the sense that we already "do a lot" in this space. The programme helped us to see where there's real potential to **go deeper rather than just do more**.

We also spent time talking about a very real tension: the worry about **raising members' expectations** and then not being able to deliver or meet their needs. That surfaced the need to **gently reset the relationship over time**: away from one-off asks or feedback loops, and towards something that feels more like an ongoing, open dialogue.

On the inside, **the work has already started to shift things**. The development and launch of our new broadband service gave us an ideal opportunity to embed member voice at the heart of product development. It also supported more creative engagement with our online communities - piloting focus groups as a powerful way to facilitate conversation, insight and testing ideas, with real potential for these to play **an even bigger role in the future**.

It's a small start, but an important one as we begin to redefine what mutuality looks like for the next chapter of our journey.



“

## BRITISH ROWING

One of the biggest reflections for us about the challenge to move forward with this work and engaging colleagues on the process. There are endless opportunities but creating **conscious momentum** and action requires organisation-wide buy in and clear accountability.

*One big 'aha' moment I had was recognising we have ready-made passionate advocates for rowing - we don't need to sell this to them but connect with them in a meaningful way and leverage their passion.*

There were some really helpful points within the programme that helped colour in the gaps, for example **direct discussions with members** gave you valuable qualitative feedback e.g. those who said they miss the magazine and *why*.

Additionally, I thought about the balance of approaches whereby we ask for **permission vs forgiveness** for trying initiatives to grow membership. Hosting webinars with clubs surfaced was an easy and effective mechanism to **bring people together** while reaping the rewards of more insight.

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## ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS, KEW

We realised during the course of the programme and inspired by the case studies that were shared, that we wanted to make a change to the way that membership is approached strategically, and more in line with our new brand framework focused on **purpose** as well as a benefits-led approach.

We realised that alongside building the case inside the organisation, there were **immediate things that we could do** to help develop an evidence base and demonstrate the value of member participation to our colleagues. So we set about undertaking a series of very **small-scale experiments**, for example we explored **running a competition** inviting members to get involved in designing family trails by sending in their favourites for inclusion in the magazine. This helped us to think about how we might make a switch in our member communications from our more usual broadcast style to more of a **conversation** inviting members in.

We also had the opportunity to test this new approach with an existing **research panel**, which confirmed a lot of enthusiasm for member to member interactions, and the importance of creating the conditions for more of this in future.

Whilst the shift to a longer term, strategic approach to membership might have **felt overwhelming at first**, we realised through the programme and tools provided that we could test and develop a range of **new participatory ideas** for membership and test those in very small scale ways.

Alongside all this, Kew's new brand framework also provides an opportunity to take forward how we might see members more as **participants in our mission** to protect plants and fungi and some early stage co-creation with our member panel has been a really interesting first step.

***Our next steps include working with other colleagues in the learning, participation and science teams to explore how we can collaborate and where there might be a role for members in existing and new participatory initiatives, for example our Grow Wild scheme.***



## WHAT THE PARTICIPANTS LEARNT

### NATIONAL TRUST

Although we weren't able to participate fully in the programme, we took much away from the discussions with the other participant organisations and recognised a lot resonated from others' experience.

In particular, we identified the need to **equip ourselves to innovate** more around membership, to demonstrate to our wider colleagues that **members are not one homogenous group** and to create opportunities to demonstrate the value of participation from members alongside revenue.

***We recognised that our organisational structure has sometimes prevented us from doing this more.***

The significant restructure undertaken in 2025 brings an opportunity to start to further build on what we learnt in these early conversations in 2026 and beyond.

PART 3:

# 10 STEPS TO MAKING THE MOST OF MEMBERSHIP

Ultimately, making the most of membership relies on individuals within organisations believing in its distinctive power and the value of relationships over transactional benefits. These steps are here to help.

- 1. RECOGNISE THE START POINT**
- 2. SET A NORTH STAR**
- 3. BRING MEMBERS AND COLLEAGUES WITH YOU**
- 4. GO WHERE THE ENERGY IS**
- 5. FIND SPACE FOR MORE THAN FEEDBACK**
- 6. TAKE SMALL STEPS (WITH OR WITHOUT PERMISSION)**
- 7. AND BUILD FROM THERE**
- 8. CLOSE THE LOOP**
- 9. MEASURE AND CELEBRATE MEMBERSHIP IN MORE WAYS**
- 10. BE READY TO MAKE A BIG LEAP FORWARD**

**STEP 1.**

# RECOGNISE THE START POINT

**What do members think of membership? What do colleagues think of members? Where does membership sit in the wider organisational strategy?** When we're caught up in the day to day of delivery, it's hard to step back and look at the reality of membership beyond the headline performance numbers. Those numbers matter, but they rarely tell the full story of how membership is understood and experienced. We need a clear picture - and a shared way of describing - the starting point, both inside and outside our organisations.

## WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

- **Reviewing** what you already know, including member data and insights, and taking note of what you don't have information on.
- **Noticing** how members and membership is (and isn't) discussed inside your organisation.
- **Considering** whether there is a defined strategy for membership and how much membership is present in the organisational strategy to achieve its mission, beyond just financial income alone.

## ONE WAY TO GET STARTED

**Hold a conversation with colleagues who have some experience of working on membership using our What is/What if prompts (see next page).**

## STEP 1: RECOGNISE THE START POINT

## PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE: ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS, KEW

Following the first workshop we ran an internal session using a set of What is/What if cards shared during the programme by the NCP team. The cards gave us a structure and format from which we could have a creative and **honest conversation** with colleagues on our **ambitions** for membership, which led to some really **helpful reflections** and insights as well as some really interesting **new ideas**.

The session prompted us to take steps and try things, for example including member participation in a new funding bid, and we noticed that the tone shifted in our internal conversations, as we grew more confident in prompting each other to share more of our work and thinking with members at earlier stages. This led to an experiment in testing out one of our appeals with members - we'd never done anything like that before and might have been reticent to do so before the programme started, but it gave us the confidence to ask members for their input which was hugely helpful.

## 'WHAT IS' PROMPTS

- An honest truth we don't always acknowledge when it comes to how we approach membership is...
- If someone in our organisation (outside of this team) were to describe the purpose of membership they'd say...
- The biggest risk we have taken when it comes to membership is...
- Something I would love our members to feel more than they currently do, would be...

## 'WHAT IF' PROMPTS

- When I think about the potential of membership, something that excites me is...
- I'd love to see us inject more X into how we think about membership...
- If I were to describe the relationship we'd like to see between members it would be...
- Members could help us change membership for the better by..

## STEP 2. SET A NORTH STAR

Once you understand how membership is viewed by both members and colleagues, you can start to build a picture of how it needs to evolve to become a more purposeful and participatory relationship. This doesn't have to be a full plan or strategy just yet - that can come later. For now, it's about setting out a direction of travel: a clear sense of where membership could go that others can get behind.

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

- **Reviewing** how you currently work with members, noticing gaps and finding new opportunities to involve members more
- **Naming** 'from/to' or 'even more' shifts to illustrate how we want the relationship with members to develop: *'we want membership to move from... to...'* or *'we want membership to become even more...'*
- **Creating** a shorthand or analogy for the change needed in your relationship with members. It can be helpful to have a way to consistently describe where you want to get to: *'we want membership to feel like...'*

### ONE WAY TO GET STARTED

**Use New Citizen Project's Participation Grid (see next page) to reflect on how you currently work with members. Ask yourself:**

- How much members contribute to pre-defined activities versus having the chance to shape initiatives and activity?
- How much does your existing activity bring members together to make connections and feel part of something bigger?
- How much do members have the chance to initiate activity to support a shared purpose?

## STEP 2: SET A NORTH STAR

## PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE: GIFFGAFF

Using the Participation Grid and plotting the activities we already do with our members has been incredibly eye opening for us. We have seen that we play a lot in the practical space, shaping the products but there's **room for us to do more** when it comes to collaborating with our members in the mission space. We have also noticed that there is an opportunity to increase the **member-led activities** like the charity nominations. The grid was brilliant at providing a level of **clarity and structure** which will make future planning more effective and meaningful.

## THE PARTICIPATION GRID:



**STEP 3.****BRING MEMBERS AND COLLEAGUES WITH YOU**

**Don't think about how to make the most of membership in isolation.** As much as possible, have early conversations with members and colleagues to build a shared understanding of where membership is now and a collective idea about what an even more purposeful and participatory relationship could look like.

**WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?**

- **Talking** to members about membership. Starting small with things like making time at member events to talk about membership, adding questions into surveys that are more open and generative. We might dig into what members most value (beyond transactional benefits alone) and what they want the future of membership to look like.
- **Involving** members in where membership goes next through things like co-creation groups or open research projects explaining the ambition behind the work and what you're learning as you go.
- **Sharing** the intention to look afresh at membership and how to make the most of its unique qualities with colleagues, especially those who play a part in delivering membership. Bring those colleagues together to build shared understanding and ownership.

**ONE WAY TO GET STARTED**

**Hold a first 'making the most of membership' session with colleagues close to membership** (membership team, comms, digital) to examine where you are now, and where colleagues see opportunity for positive change. Using tools like the **What is/What if** prompts and the **Participation Grid** to prompt thought about the future of membership.

## STEP 3: BRING MEMBERS AND COLLEAGUES WITH YOU

**PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE: BRITISH ROWING**

We began with some simple first steps, reaching out directly to contacts within the community that are already engaged with us to ask them what membership meant to them. We had **direct conversations with members** to generate authentic and rich discussion that helped us better understand some of the insights we'd heard before - understanding more about the 'why' behind certain common perceptions of membership.

Additionally, we looked at the opportunities to bring colleagues with us by identifying **opportunities to achieve mutual objectives** rather than trying to overtake people's objectives.

There is very much still work in progress happening around this, but it's led to **more constructive and collaborative** conversations about the business wide approach to membership and beginning to think about a common narrative.



## GO WHERE THE ENERGY IS

**Look for opportunities to connect membership with the organisation's priorities - whether that's a new product members could help shape or an important issue they can contribute ideas toward.** Re-centre membership by showing, in practical ways, how involving members more is both possible and valuable, and how their input can strengthen the work of the organisation.

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

- **Reviewing** organisational strategy with an eye on where members can play a greater role in achieving the mission or supporting the organisation.
- **Talking** to senior stakeholders about their priorities and vision for the organisation to better understand how and when members could play a valuable role.
- **Identifying** what issues and opportunities feel most relevant to members: What are members most willing to participate in?

### ONE WAY TO GET STARTED

**Identify the organisational priorities that members could most meaningfully contribute to.** Have conversations with colleagues to help identify the opportunities where there is most alignment between importance to the organisation and relevance to members.

## STEP 4: GO WHERE THE ENERGY IS

**PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE: GIFFGAFF**

One of the clearest ways this work came to life for us was through how we approached the launch of our broadband product. We made a deliberate choice to **involve members right from the very start**, rather than waiting until everything was fully formed.

We set up an online research community with our broadband members, building on the model we already use in our mobile business. Doing this at such an early stage in the broadband journey meant that member insight has been **shaping the product from day one**, not just reacting to it at the end.

Those early projects gave us **rich insight** into what mattered most to members - particularly around things like pricing and value - and helped the broadband and product teams ground their decisions in real member needs and expectations. Since then, we've continued to work closely with our broadband teams to **keep that feedback flowing** into the ongoing development of the service.

Alongside this, we wanted to open up the story of building broadband to a wider group of members, not just the research community.

So we created a **dedicated broadband space on our forum**, where product teams share updates and members can see what we're working on as it develops. This has been a powerful shift for colleagues too - giving them the chance to **engage directly** with members, hear real stories and feedback, and refine their thinking in a much more open and human way.

As a certified B Corp, we're also focused on how we deliver our products in a way that supports people, planet and profit. So we worked closely with both the community forum and our broadband pioneers to share and test different ideas and approaches to making a positive impact through our new service.

In terms of impact, this approach has **genuinely shifted perceptions within the broadband team**. Involving members early has moved from feeling like a risk to feeling like a real asset. It's also helped open up conversations about how similar approaches could work across other parts of the business - not just for broadband, but wherever we're developing new ideas and experiences with our members.

**STEP 5.**

# FIND SPACE FOR MORE THAN FEEDBACK

**Uncover where the organisation is most ready and able to listen to the experiences and ideas of members.** Think about ways to hear from members over a longer period, not just through quick surveys or one-off focus groups. Sustained conversations can move beyond immediate needs or complaints and into deeper discussions about the purpose of the work, how members think it can be achieved, and the part they could play. Approaches like co-creation groups or ongoing research panels can offer richer insight and stronger relationships than one off feedback alone.

## WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

- **Making** sure the conversations you have with members are meaningful with a real way to shape actions from here.
- **Starting** conversations with members with a sense of shared purpose: what this work is trying to achieve and how you'd like to work with them to get there - to avoid a purely 'Consumer' framing.
- **Mapping** out the kind of conversation you want to have with members (e.g. what feels important to share, what you're hoping to learn, how you'd like them to feel as a result of participating) and what those conversations could look like in practice (e.g. how members can join those conversations and how much time is needed).

## ONE WAY TO GET STARTED

**Look for inspiration on how other organisations involve their members or supporters and discuss what types of participation could be most fruitful.** In the programme we shared examples of co-creation groups, idea platforms, standing councils and many more - what could you most imagine working with your organisation's structures and set up, what would be easiest to get off the ground first?

## STEP 5: FIND SPACE FOR MORE THAN FEEDBACK

**PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE: RBG, KEW**

We shared some of the example case studies in NCP's Participation Cards with our member panel, who gave us **really positive feedback** about the different ways in which participatory activities might strengthen our member offer. We also used the Participation Cards with colleagues internally, to help us unlock conversations about what shifting to a more **participatory and purposeful relationship** with members might look like. It helped us to both **make tangible and clear** the type of relationship we were hoping to shift to, as well as to reassure colleagues that we didn't have to do all of this in one go!



**STEP 6.**

# TAKE SMALL STEPS (WITH OR WITHOUT PERMISSION)

**Sometimes we can take a big step forward - a landmark project that lights the way for a new way of working with members. Other times we need to build the right to go there.** To do that, start working with members in small, achievable ways: bringing members together to discuss a relevant issue, running an event differently, seeking member stories. This is about learning by doing; taking small actions and building understanding of what brings most value to members and the organisation.

## WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

- **Starting** to brainstorm the small (and big) ways that the relationship with members could grow with your North Star in mind.
- **Looking** at the upcoming opportunities - planned events, emails, campaigns - and considering how those might be re-designed.
- **Being** clear about what you are hoping to learn and how you intend to measure the results. Asking whether new ways of working are: 1. Desirable (do members want this?), 2. Feasible (do we have the skills and resources to work in this way?) and 3. Viable (will it contribute to the aims and purpose of the organisation?)

## ONE WAY TO GET STARTED

**Rapid 8's idea generation with colleagues.** Pose a design question that's something like *'How might we achieve X (our aims) with Y (our members or a specific group of members)?'* as the prompt to help steer ideas in the right direction.

1. Give colleagues a blank sheet of paper folded into 8 boxes.
2. Ask them to write the design question at the top of the paper.
3. Give them 8 minutes to come up with 8 ideas in response to the question (let them know every time a minute has passed), using a box per idea and encouraging colleagues to draw as well as write.
4. Ask colleagues to share back their top 3 ideas and discuss what came up as a group, recognising the commonalities.
5. Leave the meeting with a shortlist of ideas to develop further and test.

## STEP 6: TAKE SMALL STEPS (WITH OR WITHOUT PERMISSION)

**PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE: GIFFGAFF**

As part of our ongoing work to better understand member needs, we built on earlier digital wellbeing insights gathered in our community forum, by bringing members directly into our planning for accessibility-focused member closeness sessions. We invited a diverse group of members to **take part in discussions about their real experiences** navigating accessibility challenges across digital and mobile services.

Alongside this, we surveyed the wider member base to identify the specific areas of accessibility they felt were most important for us to learn about. These combined insights **helped shape the themes and activities** for the session, ensuring that what we explored was grounded in genuine member experiences and priorities. Digital and product teams joined the session **to hear first hand** from members, helping to build awareness and understanding, while also shaping accessibility design principles



## STEP 7. AND BUILD FROM THERE

**Plan small changes and experiments that point toward your North Star.** Pay attention to what you learn along the way, and look for ways to turn the successful tests into more permanent ways of working. Keep building energy and ownership across the organisation by sharing the story - the successes *and* failures - with colleagues. Bringing people into the learning process to help shape the next steps together and move closer to the kind of relationship you want to build with members.

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

- **Capturing** the results of working with members in more ways through things like baseline surveys understanding members' knowledge and perception before and after participation.
- **Using** the learnings from working with members in new ways to reflect on what's needed to grow and sustain this approach; what skills might be needed (e.g. to facilitate conversations, to support community building), what practical requirements (e.g. digital tools, in-person spaces), and what resources (e.g. budget, time, people).
- **Putting** in regular 'Look-up meetings' with colleagues to take a step back from the day to day of delivery and reflect on progress towards the overall shift you want to make in membership and plot next steps.

### ONE WAY TO GET STARTED

**Map all the opportunities and intentions to work with members in new ways across the coming year:** what you are hoping to learn and how they are helping to realise the overall shift you want to make.

## STEP 7: AND BUILD FROM THERE

**PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE: BRITISH ROWING**

We identified a **quick and easy way** to test and learn how we can engage better with members before we actually get into any bigger wholesale change developments where we may want to engage members with us.

There had been discussions previously about better supporting our community through engaging them on a series of topics relevant to the sport and this felt like a good opportunity to position this idea as a part of **co-creation**. If we consciously framed a *'Let's talk about...'* webinar series as **a member engagement tool**, it could become a really tangible resource to demonstrate to members how we're working and engaging with them on topics that are important to them.



**STEP 8.**

# CLOSE THE LOOP

**Remember to show members the value of their participation - sharing back what's happening as a result of their involvement.** Be honest about what's not happening or where change is slow, and invite them into the conversation about how small experiments can grow into more sustained ways of working.

## WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

- **Sharing** with the members who have taken part what is happening next, how their involvement has had an impact so far and how they might like to have a role going forward. As much as possible make it an ongoing conversation, rather than a one off shareback.
- Making more members aware of how others have been involved in membership and what is happening as a result. This can help to grow the value of membership even for those who have not directly been involved.

## ONE WAY TO GET STARTED

**Follow up with mini member debriefs:** this might be 5 minutes at the end of an event, or a standalone event in itself. It's about creating a chance to hear members' reflections, share your learnings and discuss next steps. It could even be a follow up 'thank you' and survey.



## STEP 8: CLOSE THE LOOP

### **PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE: GIFFGAFF**

A really important part of this work for us has been showing our Pioneer members that **their involvement genuinely makes a difference** - not just asking for their views and then going quiet. From the start of the broadband journey, we've tried to be open about what we're learning and how their input is shaping our thinking.

We've challenged ourselves to focus on what happens beyond gathering initial views and insights. We made sure to **go back to members with a clear summary of what we'd heard**, what themes were coming through, and where that feedback was already starting to influence decisions. That 'you said, we heard, we're doing' loop has been a really important trust-builder.

We've continued that approach through our ongoing communications with Pioneer members - sharing updates on the

evolution of broadband, being honest about what we could act on quickly, what would take longer, and where there were real constraints. **We've found that members really value that transparency**, even when the answer isn't always 'yes'.

What's been particularly powerful is how this has **shifted the tone of the relationship**. It feels much more like an ongoing dialogue than a one-off piece of research. Members can see their fingerprints on what's being built, and our teams get to experience first-hand how thoughtful, constructive and invested our members really are.

For colleagues too, this has reinforced **the value of closing the loop**. It's helped build confidence that involving members early - and staying in conversation with them - doesn't slow things down, but actually leads to better decisions and stronger outcomes.

**STEP 9.**

# MEASURE AND CELEBRATE MEMBERSHIP IN MORE WAYS

**Capture how members power the purpose of the organisation beyond just revenue - including the insights, ideas, stories and networks they bring.** Investigate and measure how membership supports members' sense of purpose, belonging, and connection, and how that influences retention and wider engagement over time. Share this more holistic picture of membership with senior decision makers, and make it possible for colleagues to hear directly from members.

## WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

- **Building** in time to hear members' reflections on their experience of involvement. Asking things like: What have they learnt? What have they valued? What would they change going forward?
- **Using** a regular member survey to understand the relationship, including things like connection to shared purpose or values, the sense of belonging, connection to other members and the organisation. You can see how this baseline is changed by the way you work with members (e.g. more involvement might strengthen a sense of shared purpose), and how that impacts KPIs like retention.
- **Making** sure colleagues hear directly from members in their own words: e.g., 'vox pop' video recordings and face-to-face meetings.

## ONE WAY TO GET STARTED

**Bring together colleagues to explore how you could measure membership in a way that drives and tracks progress towards a more participatory and purposeful relationship.** Capture what you would like members to think, know, feel and do more of as a result of being a member. Wherever possible, have the conversation with members too.

## STEP 9: MEASURE AND CELEBRATE MEMBERSHIP IN MORE WAYS

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**PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE: RBG, KEW**

Although we are still at the earliest stages of this journey, much of our focus in terms of measures has been trying to work out how to break down all the elements of the relationship we are trying to build; for example how we **demonstrate increased loyalty** beyond measuring and reporting on retention rates alone. A new data project has helped us to have a broader view of our customers, and we are hoping to explore a range of **additional metrics** including members' sense of their alignment to our purpose and cause, their likelihood to donate (not just renew) and various other details to help us build a picture and demonstrate the value of membership.

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## STEP 10. BE READY TO MAKE A BIG LEAP FORWARD

**Re-centering membership takes time and will sometimes involve battling changing business climates, priorities and leadership.** Building the case for participatory membership through small iterative steps will mean you have the evidence and tools to hand when the moment comes that your organisation is most willing to listen. Ultimately, see early experiments as part of forming the practical strategy for making the most of membership. These are an opportunity to understand what works for involving members and what's needed to achieve this at scale.

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

- **Sharing** the bigger story that small steps are part of, e.g. 'we're trying this out because we want membership to become even more...'
- **Joining** up learnings into a plan for the future - bring together what you're finding out about into an overall picture and plan.
- **Having** a 'totem' in mind. What would you do with members if you had the chance? What's the landmark project that could really show the power of working with members and inspire colleagues and members alike? Be it a Members' Assembly on a burning issue, a reimagined AGM or a member-led campaign - have ready what the big leaps forward look like.

### ONE WAY TO GET STARTED

**Join our Participatory Membership Community of Practice to get inspiration, support and practical tips so that you're ready to take your leaps when the opportunities arise.**

## STEP 10: BE READY TO MAKE A BIG LEAP FORWARD

**CASE STUDY: CO-OP**

With the support of a senior champion, the Co-op member participation team were encouraged to test and learn; to work with members **in different ways** and to build experience and knowledge of what did and didn't work through **prototyping**. Not everything was successful, but the team slowly grew their understanding of how best to connect with members - and began to build a clearer picture of member motivation - helping people to feel confident to participate and to contribute in the ways that felt right to them.

A turning point came with the arrival of a new Co-op brand, positioning member ownership as a unique selling point of the business. And because the member participation team had **rigorously measured and recorded** their results thus far, they were ready with the evidence and plan for how membership could drive things forward across Co-op.

They were able to demonstrate that **higher levels of engagement and participation** from members **led to higher spend** with Coop. And ultimately, that seeing and developing membership as a relationship drives both social and economic value for the business.

## PART 4:

# COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION AS A WAY OF WORKING

**All of New Citizen Project's work is rooted in the principle that collaboration is better than competition.** We believe that when organisations in a similar sector, often grappling with similar challenges or questions come together, they can find mutual support, insights and ideas which can spur them further forward.

This is the reason why, wherever possible, NCP tries to bring organisations together, to dig into **shared challenges** and to identify opportunities to learn and experiment together. We have been doing this since our founding in 2014, and Collaborative Innovation programmes are one of the most effective methods we use.

**Collaborative Innovation is a 'cooperative inquiry' methodology rooted in participatory research.**

It brings organisations together around a shared question, creating the space to experiment with **participatory innovation** within their individual organisations, as well as how best to share learnings in order to create similar shifts in the sector as a whole.

Each process begins with an **inquiry question**, framed as '*how might we...*', to show how participatory working can lead to the desired impact. This is followed by a series of in-person workshops over 6-9 months, giving participants the chance to work both inside and outside their organisational teams. Together they discuss, **hypothesise and ideate**, exploring the inquiry question from different angles and perspectives.

With NCP support, participants conduct **small-scale experiments** throughout the programme, testing new hypotheses and generating insights into participation and involvement. Alongside the paired working and workshops, they gather together outside the workshops for **coaching calls, lunch & learn** sessions where they hear from external speakers, and practice **action learning** to support each other as they undertake their experiments.

At the end of the programme, we hold a reflection and learning session, bringing together their progress and insights on the programme, before developing these into a set of outputs to be shared with the sector as a whole. The outputs are developed by New Citizen Project but enriched through the experience of each participant organisation, making them genuinely **rooted in deep sector experience and practice**.



## PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE OF COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION

### GIFFGAFF

One of the most valuable parts of the programme was the chance to step out of our own world and **learn alongside organisations from very different sectors**, while realising that we're all wrestling with many of the same underlying membership challenges. That mix of **fresh perspectives** and **shared experience** was incredibly powerful.

It was also genuinely refreshing to have **dedicated time and space** to work on membership rather than in it. Having that space helped us slow down, ask better questions and think more strategically about the role of membership in our future.

The New Citizen Project team brought both warmth and constructive challenge. They took the time to really understand how we operate, which meant **the conversations were grounded, relevant and thought-provoking**. Their challenge helped us surface assumptions, test our thinking, and explore new ways of bringing mutuality and participation to life.

Overall, the programme felt **both stretching and supportive** - creating the right conditions for honest reflection, practical experimentation and collective learning.

### BRITISH ROWING

It was so beneficial to hear from other industries and learn from how they approach different things but all while **facing the same fundamental challenges around membership**. It was a really refreshing and supportive environment, and it was helpful to have dedicated full days to commit to this wider work away from the everyday.

*The New Citizen Project team provided considered challenges, and there was a real conscious effort from the team to understand how British Rowing works and what our challenges are, which helped with having thought provoking conversations that empowered us to think differently.*



# PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE OF COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION



## ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS, KEW

More than anything we found it reassuring to find that despite differences in each participant organisations' size and purpose, we were facing many similar issues and questions around membership. It was reassuring to hear from others and **to realise your organisation is not alone** in grappling with many of the same questions!

Hearing from others at different stages along the journey, for example the Co-op or Good Gym was reassuring but also offered **a window into the art of the possible** and provided us with the inspiration to keep at it, but we also learnt so much from each other. At least one team had invariably had a **similar experience** or had **tried something** that we were looking to explore, and we were able to offer our experiences and support to the group as the programme unfolded.



## NATIONAL TRUST

It was always interesting to have the opportunity to discuss shared challenges and opportunities with other membership organisations and we gleaned a lot from the discussions we were able to participate in.

Our team found **the tools like Rapid 8's and the Participation Grid** useful and these will continue to be helpful as NT moves towards a more iterative 'test and learn' culture as we deliver our new strategy.



# THE PARTICIPATORY MEMBERSHIP COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Our work with British Rowing, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, giffgaff and National Trust in this programme has enabled us, over the course of many months, to better understand what it really takes to re-centre membership as a purposeful and participatory relationship.

All of the participants commented on the value of working alongside other membership organisations - learning from each other, and providing mutual accountability and support.

As we share these learnings with the broader membership sector, we want to make an offer to anyone who would like to further transform their own organisation's relationship with members.

Join our [Participatory Membership Community of Practice](#) to gain insight and tools, develop relationships, test ideas and reflect on what's working within your organisation, with others who have the same ambition to transform membership through participation.

Throughout 2026, New Citizen Project will host the community, offering a mix of learning calls, action learning sets and inspirations to fuel you to go forward and take your next steps.

We're piloting this programme over the year, and our hope is that we'll grow a community which can learn together, explore, experiment and support each other. Joining also gives you access to the full suite of NCP participatory membership tools to help you along the way.

If you're working in a membership organisation and are interested, you can join now through our [Luma calendar](#). If you have any questions, feel free to email us [hello@newcitizenproject.com](mailto:hello@newcitizenproject.com)



**For more information contact us:  
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