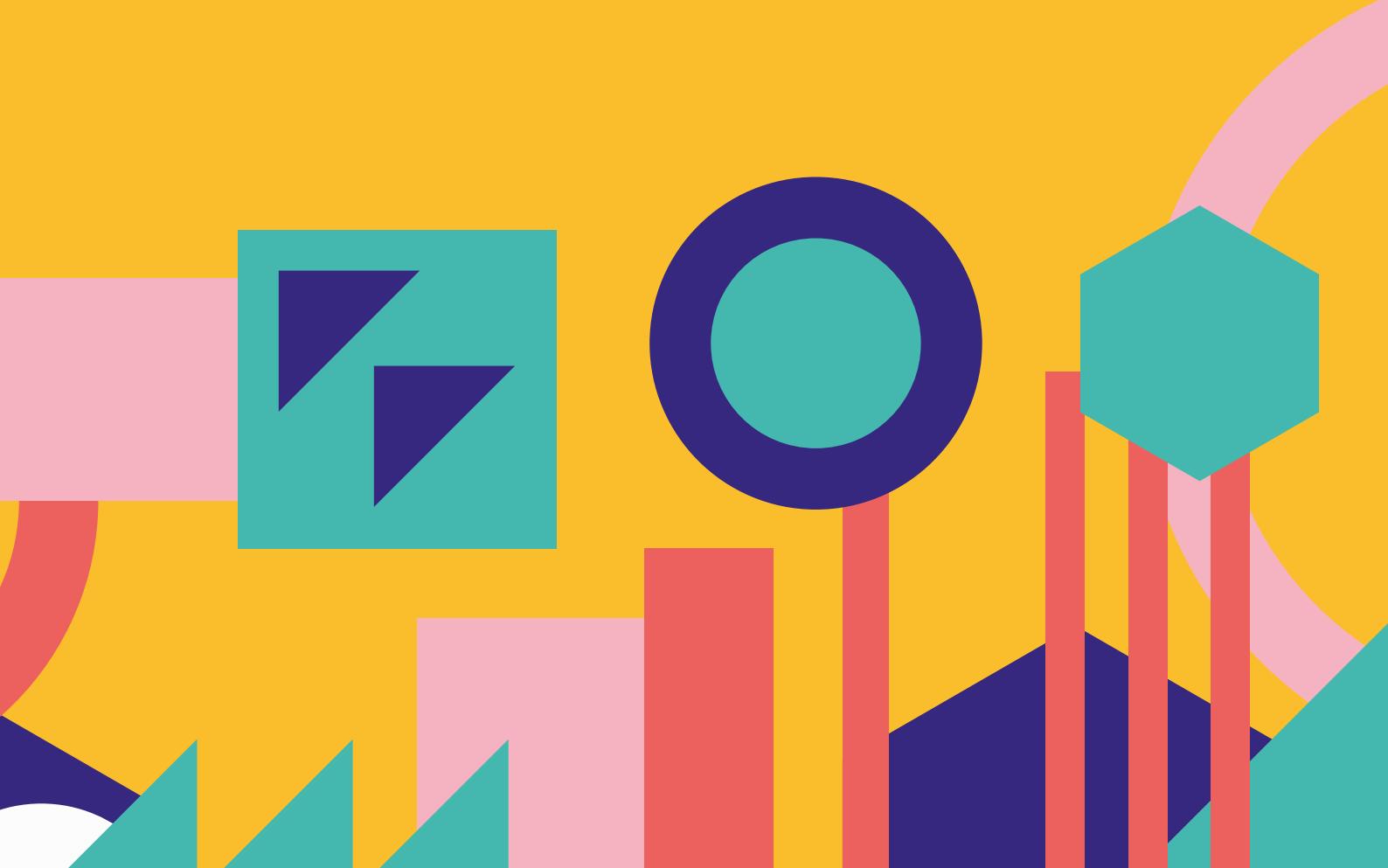




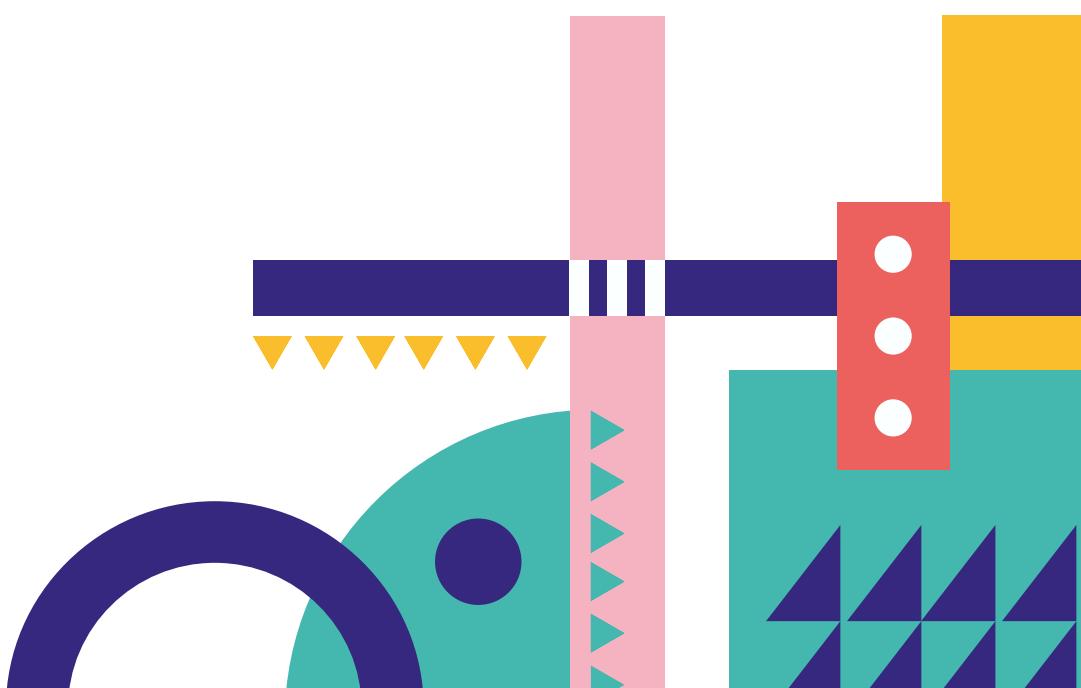
Coordinating community voice

Lessons from our
WM2U Experience



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Introduction

The What Matters to You (WM2U) Coordinator role has provided a vital bridge, working alongside communities, practitioners and organisations, and using their influence and networks to draw in resources from across Scotland.

This report codifies the key conditions, qualities, and elements of the role – not as a job description, but as a practice. It describes how the WM2U Coordinator helped reimagine what ‘working with’ children, families, practitioners, and strategic leaders could mean, and why sustaining these ways of working is important if public services are to transform communities into places where families can thrive.

The role contributes to change at both the community and system levels, supporting community voice to be brought to the centre of decision making and creating safe spaces for practitioners to learn by modelling a very human approach. The coordinator has also enabled senior leaders to gain a better understanding of what matters to community members, so that services can respond in more effective ways and deliver better outcomes.

The role has also been shown to have efficacy in other system change initiatives in [Leeds](#)¹ and Linlathen in [Dundee](#)².

1. <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/community-centred-public-services-cormac-russell-stronger-things-2025>, p13
2. <https://www.dundee.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Linlathen%20Local%20Fairness%20Initiative%20%20Evaluation%20Report%20September%202025.pdf>

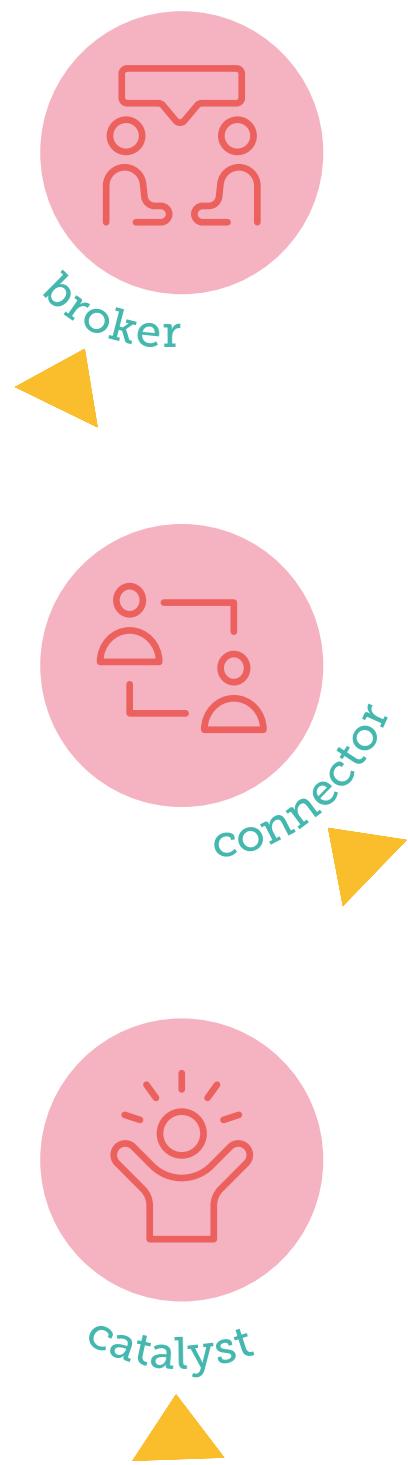
The WM2U Coordinator's role in context

The WM2U Coordinator was not simply a project manager or programme lead. Instead, the role sat alongside statutory services and communities while remaining independent to build trust and act as an honest broker, connector and catalyst for change.

This 'in-between' positioning allowed the Coordinator to create new kinds of movement and trust across boundaries that have historically kept communities and systems apart.

The role was funded by The Hunter Foundation and BBC Children in Need, and supported by an overseeing Project Manager, who enabled the Coordinator to work relationally and intuitively, outside the constraints of traditional hierarchies and performance targets, while still having access to senior decision-makers. The funder backing carried convening power and credibility, which helped open doors, bring influential local authority staff around the table, and create space for conversations that might not otherwise have happened.

The WM2U Coordinator embodied a philosophy of working *with* people rather than *doing to* – creating space for agency, shared ownership, and authentic participation. Their approach helped practitioners rediscover purpose and belief in what is possible, and helped communities regain voice, confidence, and the means to act.

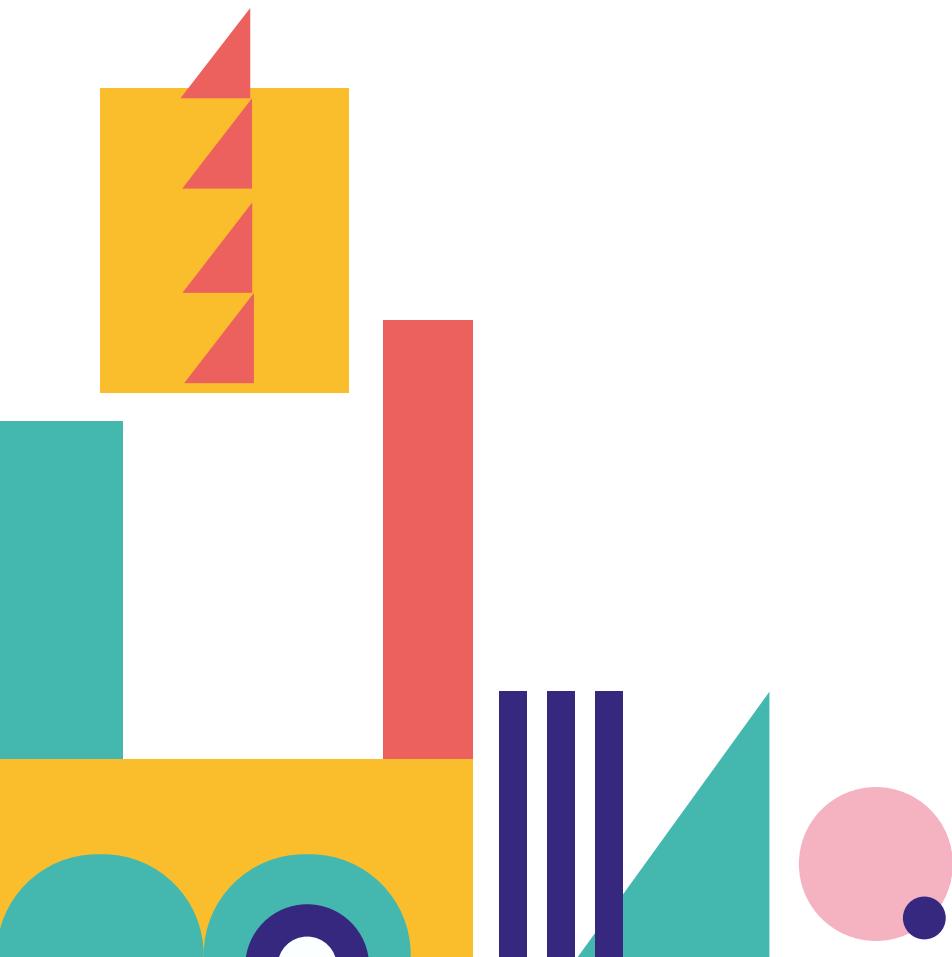


Overview of the WM2U role

While the WM2U Coordinator role can be defined primarily by values, relationships, and ways of working, it also involved activities that enabled the WM2U approach to be delivered in practice.

These activities were linked to the WM2U theory of change and learning framework. The WM2U Coordinator worked alongside senior leaders, practitioners, parents, carers, and young people to collaboratively explore new ways of operating that shifted power and ownership, so that families were given the agency to contribute, achieve, and make visible change for themselves, their communities and the services that support them.

This also involved paying close attention to learning at individual, community and system levels, and ensuring that insights and learning about what matters changed practice locally and led to the approach being adapted and scaled more widely.



Qualities of the role

This report proposes important qualities and elements that made the work possible and would be required for similar work in other geographies. For more information about the Coordinator's work in Dundee see www.wm2u.org.uk.

1. Autonomy and freedom to follow opportunity

Begin by taking time to understand local context, the history of services, and the dynamics between different organisations, teams, and communities. This approach allows '**learning your way in**' rather than coming in with solutions. This is essential for building trust and aligning with the communities' interests and needs, rather than following top-down priorities. Valuing what has been progressed between practitioners and communities and, with optimism, moving forward to accelerate and deepen engagement.

The role requires to be autonomous and flexible, able to 'go where there is energy' – following with genuine interest, and readiness to engage. **Small amounts of funding play an important role in this.** Holding a small pot of unrestricted funds to enable participation in community-led activities, provides the ability to act swiftly and resourcefully, dismantling barriers, unlocking creativity, and demonstrating trust in local people. These small, tangible actions build credibility and momentum.

“

If there is energy,
harness it.

Rather than forcing engagement, I followed energy – investing time where genuine commitment existed and letting go where it didn't. This approach ensured effort went where it could grow into sustainable change, rather than dissipate in compliance.

WM2U Coordinator

2. A permissive and trusting team culture

The culture underpinning the work must allow the Coordinator to work with intuition, and build relationships, without the pressure to deliver against performance metrics. This permissive environment gives them **agency to experiment, reflect, and act without fear of 'failing.'**

They must be encouraged to “say what they see” – offering non-judgemental, honest reflection and feedback. This reflective stance builds mutual respect and **keeps the focus on purpose rather than politics.**

“

**Give them
a rope up
the beach.**

WM2U Coordinator

Trust begins with small gestures, like showing patience when plans change. Over time, small gestures can support relationships into partnerships grounded in honesty. A cancelled meeting becomes a phone call with context, and that honesty can signal connection.

3. Starting with relationships

Starting with relationships is the heart of the Coordinator’s work. They are not ‘outsiders’ delivering change, but an insider helping others to learn and have confidence in their own capabilities for change. They work with practitioners, senior leaders, and communities to cultivate trust through authenticity, transparency, and persistence.

The Coordinator **built relationships at multiple levels** – starting strategically with senior leaders (to build credibility and permission), and locally with Community Learning and Development (CLD) practitioners, teachers, housing officers, social workers, health practitioners, and third sector organisations.

To ground the work in lived and living experience, the Coordinator developed relationships with parents, carers, children and young people, alongside practitioners. For many families, and young people, interaction with local authority services had historically been characterised by being acted upon rather than actively involved. Decisions were often made about them and for them, particularly within systems such as social work, housing, and policing. This contributed to feelings of disempowerment, mistrust and distance from statutory services.

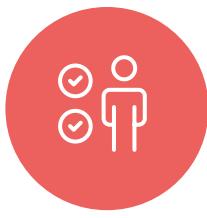
The Coordinator supported practitioners to find ways to enable parents, carers, children and young people to feel like experts in their own lives, and to be able to influence decisions that affect them, individually and collectively.

Working on multiple levels can create system learning because leaders and practitioners are more connected and attuned to community realities, while communities gain confidence that their voice matters.

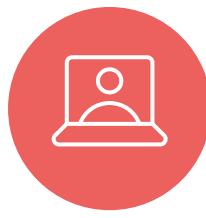
The Coordinator builds relationships by:



Making a personal connection through caring about what people care about.



Delivering on what you say you will do – on time at worst and ahead of time as a norm.



Finding out and respecting communication preferences.

Other subsequent and critical relationships have been built with the elected members of the council.

“

Adding value where we can.

WM2U Coordinator

I love this area to bits, particularly one of the football teams, but had no intention of moving here. I made this intention clear and how I would never take over or dictate, but to add value often through quiet, behind-the-scenes support. Whether listening to practitioners' frustrations about bureaucracy or helping seed-fund a community idea, I looked for opportunities to make life easier and more purposeful for others. I likened the role to being “fuel that helps the car run better” – providing the momentum that helps frontline services sustain purpose.

4. Recruit on resilience

The Coordinator role requires emotional stamina. Building trust in environments which may be marked by past disappointment and resistance can mean absorbing tension, disarming conflict, and maintaining belief when others hesitate.

"The Coordinator has been a lifeline. He's kept me up to date with funding opportunities and always encouraged me to keep going, especially when things were tough. He never gives up – he'd send regular emails with suggestions and new ideas, always steering me in the right direction. Even during the slump when we weren't getting any money in, he stayed positive saying, 'Let's keep going. We can try this fund and that fund.'"

The Coordinator has learnt how to **neutralise tension rather than escalate it**. By listening deeply, acknowledging frustration, and showing up consistently, the Coordinator has demonstrated the kind of relational steadiness that helps people move from guardedness to openness.

“

**Disarm
tension.**

Change is rarely smooth, and I disarm tension by “stroking, not biffing”. Through compassion, humour, consistency, and persistence, I have at times turned sceptics into collaborators, showing that relational patience can overcome resistance.

WM2U Coordinator



Essential elements of the role

Below are the essential elements that make the Coordinator role effective, distinctive and human, blending strategic capability, creative autonomy, and emotional intelligence.



100% focus on being alongside practitioners and families

Identifying collectively practical, real-life solutions that improve how public resources are used locally.



Freedom to follow opportunity

Responding to emerging needs rather than being confined to predetermined priorities.



Outcome-focused rather than output-driven

With no imposed performance indicators that undermine relational trust.



Entrepreneurial mindset

Proactive, adaptive, persistent, optimistic and continually seeking creative ways to make progress.



"Two ears, one mouth" rule

Prioritising listening and understanding over talking or prescribing.



Wholly relational approach

Taking time to understand what makes people feel positive and motivated, not just focusing on problems.



Ability to engage at all levels

From senior local authority leaders to frontline practitioners and community members of all ages, interests and needs.



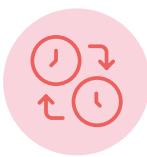
Direct access to decision-makers

Bypassing bureaucratic ladders that delay or dilute action.



Flexible use of an autonomous budget

Enabling quick, practical responses to opportunities.



Flexible working patterns

Recognising that meaningful community engagement rarely fits into a 9-5 framework.



Storytelling and communication skills

Collecting and sharing stories in written, oral, and digital forms to build insight and connection.



Cross-sector connector and networker

Unbound by departmental silos (e.g. CLD, education, housing, or social work)



Personal passion for place

A sense of genuine interest in the place's wellbeing and potential.

Building on these conditions, qualities, and elements helped develop what became known (as described by the WM2U Coordinator) as the 'WM2U Brand' - not a logo, but a reputation built on trust, reliability, and relational integrity: a way of working that other people respected, trusted, and wanted to align with.

This made further connections easier, allowed new alliances to be formed, and enabled deeper change.



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