



# BUILDING A BIGGER WE

INSIGHTS FROM OUR NETWORK



A BETTER WAY

CIVIL  
EXCHANGE  
Strengthening Society's Connection to Government

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Edited by Caroline Slocock and Steve Wyler

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A Better Way is a network of leaders from across the voluntary, public and private sectors who want to improve services, strengthen communities and create a fairer society, and are exchanging ideas, knowledge and experiences to help make this happen. It is co-convened by Caroline Slocock and Steve Wyler and hosted by the think tank Civil Exchange.

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If you have any comments or questions about this publication, do please let us know – please email [info@betterway.network](mailto:info@betterway.network).

And if you are not yet a member and would like to join, or would simply like to find out more, do please visit our website [www.betterway.network](http://www.betterway.network).



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# BUILDING A BIGGER WE



## Insights from the network, by Caroline Slocock and Steve Wyler

At our Annual Gathering at the end of 2021, we talked about the importance of building a Bigger We. It's a big ambition. Ultimately it's about improving services, building community and creating a fairer society and this would mean a very different kind of world in which:

- Everyone is heard and believed in, given a fair opportunity to thrive, and the ability to influence the things that matter to them.
- Every community comes together, looks out for each other, respects difference, and enables everyone to belong.
- Society as a whole values and invests in everyone and in every community.

Obviously we have quite a way to go... But there are glimpses of these things happening already. We believe that by learning from and inspiring each other we can create greater momentum for the change we want to see. Individually we can lead the way. And by working together we can make the exceptional commonplace.

### The Better Way network

One benchmark is the network itself, where in a small way we are also building a Bigger We. We've become bigger and more diverse and members shared ideas and inspiration

in more than 50 meetings in 2021. We expanded from over 600 in January 2021 to over 900 people by April 2022. Our *Time for a Change* publication, which set out our Better Way model in February 2021, was warmly received and circulated widely, not least on twitter, where we now have 2,000 followers. More people from across the country, and from many different backgrounds and organisations, are joining us, and our understanding of how to improve services, build community and create a fairer society has deepened as a consequence.

In the wider world, 70 per cent of our members told us at our 2021 Annual Gathering that they thought momentum for a Better Way is rising, albeit often slowly. We've heard inspiring stories from our members about how a Better Way approach can change how things are done, especially at local level, and there are champions in both the public and voluntary sectors and across different fields. The essays in this collection give a taste of what is possible. As the pandemic has shown, mountains can be moved when there is a common purpose and when there are strong relationships within communities and across organisations. But this still falls short of the system-wide change, for example in areas like health and social care, which will move us closer to our ultimate vision.

## Looking ahead

It's clear there's much more to do to build the Bigger We. We've also heard of deepening challenges and of growing divisions and erosion of trust in society. Services are struggling and sometimes failing and those that are trying to change can all too easily revert to type under pressure and competition for resources. Too often, power, which is already in too few hands, is being consolidated, and the voices of those with least power are still not being heard. It is becoming harder to challenge injustices. Faced with this, there is a deep and growing unease about what lies ahead, from global warming to a country and world becoming ever more unequal.

Too often, individuals and organisations are pushing a boulder up the hill against the

forces that resist new ways of working. We are hearing that resilience is becoming an issue and the personal and professional support of networks like a Better Way seems especially important now. We remain hopeful that by coming together we will not only achieve our goals faster, we will eventually create an unstoppable force.

As one member put it at our 2021 Annual Gathering, we should seek to 'acknowledge the points of light and create constellations out of shared interest and need.'

## What we've learnt

We've found ourselves returning again and again to our Better Way guiding principles. These came out of deep discussion and



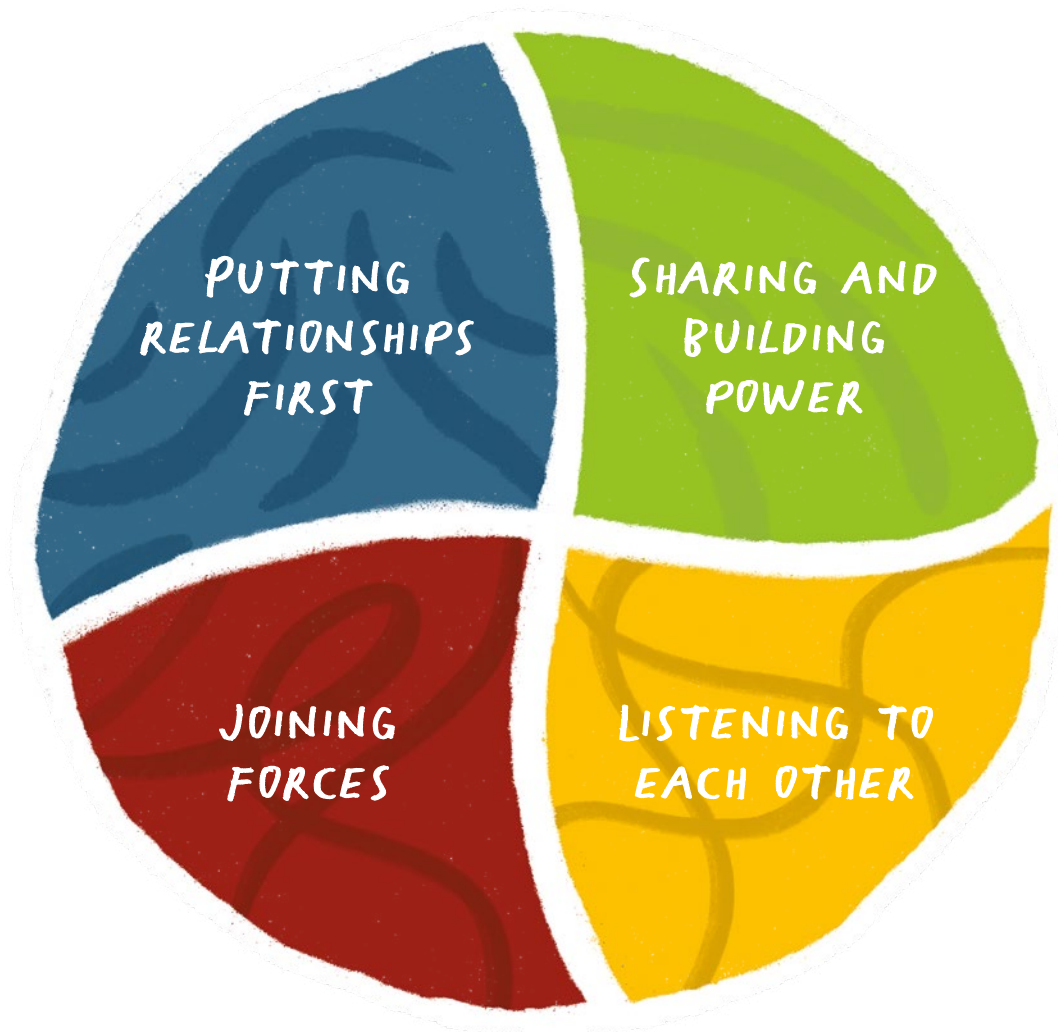
debate in the network over several years. While they have been refined more than once, they have stood the test of time. Everyone who responded to our recent survey said they like the principles (83 per cent saying 'very much').

At the beginning of 2021, we set out our Better Way model of change, a set of behaviours which, we believe, can be used to translate our guiding principles into practical action, as summarised in the diagram here.

In our survey, 94 per cent of respondents told us they like this model of change. *Comments include: 'incredibly useful', 'I use this regularly in my work', 'meaningful no matter what sector you are from', 'very much about how as well as what.'*

Over 2021, we held a series of events – ongoing cells, one-off roundtables and regular drop-in sessions – to explore more deeply how to put these four behaviours into effect. In the following pages are some of the insights that have come out of these discussions.

## BEHAVIOURS FOR BUILDING A BETTER WAY



## Putting relationships first



**As a society, in our services and our organisations because people cannot thrive without good relationships**

To put relationships first, let's:

- Make relationship-building a core operating principle and central to each job and to the workplace culture of every organisation.
- Demonstrate and champion human qualities – for example kindness, warmth and honesty.
- Recognise and showcase the strengths in the people we serve and give them leadership roles.
- Give freedom to the front line to build relationships so they can understand what's needed and do what's right.

As **David Robinson** from the Relationships Project – the thought leader for our Putting Relationships First cell – said at our 2021 Annual Gathering, the pandemic has left 'deep tissue damage'. However, it has also demonstrated the power and potential of relationships and that window is still open. We need to actively campaign in favour of relationship-building and also demonstrate human qualities ourselves. Our goal should be to make relationship-building not 'the extra mile' but the 'first mile' for people like social workers, he said, and added: 'We need to move from "Me to We."'



### A few words from our network

'We achieve most when we look for what's strong, not for what's wrong.'

'It's really about bringing people together on a journey rather than telling them what to do.'

'Relationships on their own aren't enough of course, but making them a core operating principle, rather than the "fluffy extra" is the point.'



## Sharing and building power



**Because power is held in too few hands and we all have more power than we think to change things for the better**

To share and build power, let's:

- Increase our own power by challenging self-limiting beliefs and practices and unlock the power of lived experience.
- Build wider alliances around a common cause, ensuring these reflect the full diversity of our society and are equitable and inclusive.
- Use imagination to engage people who feel powerless and create alternative futures.
- Practise 'servant leadership', releasing power in others, and stop others – and ourselves – from abusing power.

**Sue Tibballs** from the Sheila McKechnie Foundation, a thought leader for our Sharing and Building Power cell, has reflected that it is really difficult to change the culture and it's important to understand power and become more literate in how it works. Power is not binary, as we tend to think, happening on one side only. The key is not so much about giving power away as recognising that we all have power and must use that power conscientiously and well.



### A few words from our network

'Authenticity is power.'

'Everyone has power. The most responsible thing is to give it away.'

'Greta Thunberg is a fantastic example of this. Undoubtedly a leader but starting with absolutely no positional power. Personal power can achieve so much in a positive way.'

## Listening to Each Other



**Particularly to those least heard, because that is the only way to find out what's not working and discover what will**

To listen to each other, let's:

- Set aside regular time and space to listen with an open mind, reach out to people who are not 'in the room', and act on what we hear.
- Ensure staff, volunteers, trustees and advisers are reflective of the communities they serve.
- Let people shape the agenda through informal everyday listening activities, as well as in formal exercises like Citizens Assemblies.
- Bring people with lived experience into research and policy-making, for example as citizen scientists.

**Karin Woodley**, thought leader for our Listening to Each other cell, has explained that 'radical listening' means stopping the normal intellectual sorting process and unlearning how we lead. In order to truly realise the transformative nature of relationship building and listening, we must radically change how we listen, she said, recognising that 'we are not the specialists' and being quiet and resisting the temptation to speak and sum up. It is especially important to listen to people who have been pushed to one side and remain voiceless, and find ways to amplify their power.



### A few words from our network

'Voices need to have consequence in the context of now.'

'Let's create a "team of us" with the communities we serve, instead of othering them.'

'If listening is a process and not an event then it needs to be a continual relationship and dialogue that includes action and delivery.'

## Joining forces



### Because most problems are too complex to solve alone

To help us join forces, let's:

- Build a common understanding of what good looks like by listening to people at the sharp end.
- Use this to find common cause, surfacing and resolving any conflicts or power imbalances.
- Stop trying to control from the centre and create a culture in which people at every level have the power to be leaders for system change.
- Seek out powerful allies elsewhere, including in the business world.

**Cate Newnes-Smith**, thought-leader for our Joining Forces cell, has said that the key lesson she had learnt during the cell discussions was the difference between partnership on the one hand and true collaboration on the other, although she prefers the term joining forces because it seems more active and definite. She has illustrated this by describing different ways of arranging a party. Partnership is inviting other people to your own party or, when more participative, inviting others to help you throw a party you've organised, for example, by bringing food. In contrast, collaboration, or joining forces, is much more like a street party, where the event is organised together, with everyone pitching in.



### A few words from our network

'Everyone should be working for the community's, not their organisation's, needs.'

'Collaboration succeeds when we assume the best, not the worst, in others.'

'Covid-19 has shown that not working together is not an option, so the question is how to join forces well, not whether.'

## We've started to think about three big cross-cutting questions

Alongside continuing work to deepen and share understanding about the four behaviours described in the previous pages, there are also three cross-cutting questions that have emerged which we are exploring further.

### 1. What kind of leaders should we be?

We've started to talk about a new kind of leadership where:

- We become leaders not because we hold positions of power, but because we give power to others.
- We deploy the four Better Way behaviours to build connection and community beyond our organisations.
- We create the conditions for those at the sharp end to take more control.

But how can we counter the existing 'command and control' and managerial leadership model and make this new style of leadership more widespread?

Nick Sinclair who runs the Local Area Co-ordinators Network and Community Catalysts'

New Social Leaders programme, said at our Annual Gathering that he had found that many people had been provoked by the pandemic crisis to ask themselves, 'What does it mean to be a leader?' 'We can all be leaders and all be followers', he'd discovered. It all depends on the context and particular knowledge. We should work 'in a spirit of curiosity to find each other's potential'.

This is what one participant said at our Gathering:

'I would add that diversity needs more than representation, it needs to be deliberately inclusive. Also that without acknowledging the inherent inequalities of the structure, we cannot truly shift the leadership role.'

### 2. How can we unlock our humanity and imagination?

We've identified that:

- Our humanity can build bridges and move us to change.
- Collective imagination can make a different future possible.
- There are ways to make a different kind of space to listen deeply to each other, share our stories, and tell new ones.

But some people may feel this is a distraction or are uncomfortable with opening up. How can we overcome that hesitancy and mainstream these approaches?

Phoebe Tickell from Moral Imaginations, speaking at our Annual Gathering, pointed out

that children are naturally imaginative, as we can see when they play, but 'imagination gets colonised' in the pursuit of 'one right answer' and we end up with 'cookie-cutter' brains. As a consequence, imagination is side-lined into entertainment and is often only reserved for some people in our society who work in the arts, for example. But we all need imagination, she says, so 'we need to de-colonise and re-wild our imaginations'.

As one participant said in response:

'Story-telling is a powerful technique to unlock imagination and humanity. It can be much more effective than simply trying "to fight policy with policy."'

### 3. How can we remove the roadblocks?

We've heard that many people at every level can play a part in driving change by:

- Challenging and changing whatever stands in the way, including the deep-seated assumptions that can prevent us from being our best selves.
- Calling out inequalities and abuses of power, and making sure everyone can participate on their own terms.
- Assuming the best in others and seeing difference, conflict and division as an opportunity to pause, seek to understand, and find a fresh way.

But resistance to change is widespread, whether through culture, systems or practices. So how can we get better at overcoming the resistance and removing the roadblocks?

Kristian Tomblin, speaking at our Annual Gathering, explained that he had worked for 15 years in a commissioning role for services

for people with complex needs, including the victims of sexual violence. Five years ago he had started a listening exercise and concluded that he was complicit in a service architecture that causes harm. He and others were heavily invested in managerialism and a target culture. Reflecting on how to break down this culture, he said change starts with us, echoing the final Better Way principle. 'We change the system by changing ourselves,' he explained. He tells people he works with to experiment, test and learn, build community and show more empathy. 'Change goes viral when empathy is deployed,' he concluded.

This is what one participant at our Gathering said:

'You need to go where the energy is, rather than butting your head against a wall. Seek out the people who want to do things differently and work with them. But don't avoid the difficult issues, or conflict.'

### What do our members say?

To help share the rich wisdom of our network with others, we've brought together a collection of essays written by some of our members, who we asked to focus on one aspect of these themes. The essays are grouped around the four behaviours in our model and the three cross-cutting questions that also emerged in 2021. We hope you'll find time to explore these: a full list can be found [here](#).

**Caroline Slocock and Steve Wyler are the co-convenors of a Better Way.**

PUTTING  
RELATIONSHIPS  
FIRST



# RELATIONSHIPS: THE FIRST MILE NOT THE EXTRA MILE



**By David Robinson**

In our Putting Relationships First cell, we've been exploring how to make relationships central to our society and in our services and organisations, because people cannot thrive without good relationships. David Robinson, our thought leader for the cell, writes here about why this is important and what we've learnt.

Too often, relationships are the last thing we think about when they should be the first.

Take hospitals. Over the last few years, they have been in almost constant crisis. Even now, as politicians tell us that the worst of the pandemic is over, patients are still waiting for ambulances, waiting in ambulances, stretchers are double stacked in stone cold corridors, there's standing room only in A & E, red alerts and closed doors.

Distant ministers when challenged say that the NHS will 'get through this'. Of course it will, in the sense that it won't perish with a bang like a burst balloon, but the deep tissue damage to patients and staff will be grave and enduring.

Covid is an exceptional driver, but the crisis is not novel. The NHS teeters on the brink every winter. Paramedics, triage staff and

receptionists suffer the harsh brunt of our understandable but misplaced anger. These problems are not of their making and the solutions are not within their reach. In fact, a part of the long-term answer to the hospital crisis doesn't lie in the hospital sector at all. Or even in the NHS as currently configured.

It lies in the before and after. In reducing the need for acute admissions wherever possible. And in the safe and compassionate discharge of patients who no longer need acute care, as rapidly as possible.

## The before and after

A director at the London Hospital once told me that one in five beds were occupied by patients whose illness was caused or exacerbated by underlying, long term and, critically, *preventable*, conditions. We know that health messages, preventing the

preventable, are best received from people in our own community, people we like and respect, people, in short, with whom we have a good relationship. Community-based health education, ‘mobilising the bonds’ as Amitai Etzioni says, reaches the parts, and works in ways, that institutions cannot.

We also know that, even in this time of crisis, at least ten per cent of our hospital beds are occupied by people who are not ready to cope alone but don’t need acute care. Better by far for them to be properly supported in their own homes or in a community setting.

*Both the before and the after are all about relationships: the relationships in the community. The relationships between communities. The relationships that link people, place and service providers.*

## **Relationships, relationships, relationships**

Repeatedly in our Better Way cell on putting relationships first, we have heard brilliant stories about how communities and organisations are working together, or running services, doing difficult things, achieving extraordinary outcomes, with

strong relationships as the constant thread joining people to place, services to people, and people to one another. We have talked about:

- making relationship-building the purpose of our work.
- turning organisations into communities, not machines.
- seeing people as the solution, not the problem.
- building good relationships in adversity and conflict.
- relational leadership.

But – and here’s the rub – our brilliant stories are mostly one place wonders, inspiring exceptions, even though problems like the hospital crisis affect everyone everywhere. Social change at scale invariably begins with small acts and distributed players. Place by place activity generates well-informed, deep-rooted progress. But such radical incrementalism isn’t always sufficient. Our task now is to supersize the learning and turn common sense into common practice.

Our cell meetings have discussed the barriers: culture and path dependency, leadership models and systems, and the importance of ‘being the change’ –





demonstrating the qualities that build trust and share power. We have talked about how relationship-building can be ‘stamped out’ by command and control practices and targets and how this can be challenged by changing the norms, for example by including relationship building in job descriptions.

Leaders have the power and responsibility to set a new culture, say Better Way colleagues. Change is a continuous process. It must involve informal as well as formal behaviours. ‘The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture. If you do not manage culture, it manages you, and you may not even be aware of the extent to which this is happening,’ says Professor Edgar Schein.

Overwhelmingly our conversations have been realistic, at times painful, but also regularly, cautiously optimistic. Loss and isolation have reminded us all how much we need one another. Mutual aid and the burgeoning informal community support has shown us, again and again, the power

and potential of human beings being human, caring for, with and about one another.

It is inappropriate to talk about ‘opportunity’ when people are suffering, but behaviours have shifted, mostly if not everywhere, and so far temporarily, from a ‘me to we’ society in the last two years. These behaviours won’t last if we don’t act to embed them, but we could emerge from this dreadful period with the knowledge, and the evidence, to tackle old problems and to meet new ones with fresh conviction and authority. Relationship building is the better way.

**David Robinson is the Co-lead of the Relationship Project and a founding member of a Better Way.**

# PUTTING RELATIONSHIPS FIRST IN EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE



**By Graeme Hodgson**

**A key lesson from our Putting Relationships First cell is that it's important to make relationship-building a core operating principle and central to each job and to the workplace culture of every organisation. Graeme Hodgson writes here about what they've been doing in East Cambridgeshire to put this into practice.**

I have always believed that we are stronger together and by embracing diversity and engaging in meaningful conversations and relationships across the barriers that sometimes divide us, almost anything is possible.

When I was asked to take responsibility for a large-scale place-based programme bringing together a dozen different innovative projects in Adult Social Care, I immediately knew that building the right relationships with stakeholders was going to be essential for success. That meant relationships not only with partners and providers in the local health and care system, but (especially) with local residents who would be key to a co-designed, co-created set of solutions that would help them do the things that mattered to them, in the places they called home, with the people they chose to do them with.

That's right, I was given an opportunity to put into practice the Social Care Future vision in the form of a programme called Care Together (initially dubbed Happy at Home), and knew that the insights and exchanges made possible by participating in online events promoted by a Better Way were going to help me do just that. The aims of Care Together are to:

- work with local people and services to design a system which makes it easier for people to access support;
- improve the way that organisations deliver care and support, and how people access services;
- raise awareness of local care and support resources;
- give people more choice of local support and more options for paying for help if they are unable to manage this themselves;
- support people to be as independent and happy in their own home as possible.

The two councils I work for are facilitating a stronger relationship between residents needing care and their personal assistants and communities, working in a variety of ways. For example, we are seeking to change the situation where domiciliary carers often change from one week to the next and no real lasting relationship is built. Direct payments to people needing care are a standard option, but this comes with what can be a heavy and undesirable administrative burden as a direct employer, which many people, particularly older adults, shy away from. As part of a larger programme of changes, residents are instead being offered Individual Service Funds, through which a third party takes away the administrative burden, but people needing care still retain direct control over who becomes their carer and what services they access, with flexibility to change when they wish to. The councils have also commissioned a Direct Payment Support Service to give advice for those who do want to take full budgetary control.

We are proud to be working with Community Catalysts to enable carers to become self-employed, so they are better able to develop strong, consistent relationships with those they care for, particularly in under-served rural communities, serving the local population with minimal travel time, thus generating a smaller carbon footprint than traditional home care models, which often see workers commuting long distances by car.

We build relationships in other ways, too, particularly through the social connecting role of community hubs and community organisers and mutual aid groups. For example, we have a network of Community Navigators who signpost people to local services and activities, with the aim of early intervention.

We build relationships with service users through co-production, for example through Healthwatch Partnerships Boards, and they work with providers and people with lived experience at the very beginning of designing what they commission.

We also seek to build good relationships with central government, the NHS and other local authorities and, as a result of the trust this has created, have been able to improve care, for example directly providing PPE and Covid-19 vaccinations to personal assistants on the same terms and at the same time as they were made available to NHS and care home staff.

The council has also been looking at how to direct more resources to relationship-building and to measure relationships and their outcomes, not outputs. To help us measure the right thing we ask service users: 'What does good look like to you? What is it you want to do? How can we help?'

It is only by establishing meaningful relationships between members of the public, providers, local authorities and the voluntary and community sector that we can move forward with truly person-centred, place-based solutions that generate the outcomes people are seeking.

**Graeme Hodgson is a Commissioning Manager in Adult Social Care at Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council and a volunteer for Care Network Cambridgeshire as well as being a local community organiser, Scout leader and father of four.**

# UBUNTU!



**By Olivier Tsemo**

**It's important to demonstrate and champion human qualities, for example kindness, warmth and honesty, in what we do, we've concluded in our Putting Relationships First cell. Olivier Tsemo writes here about what this has meant in his work in Sheffield.**

'Ubuntu' is a Bantu term that translates as 'humanity'. It could also mean 'I am because we/you are' or 'humanity towards others'. It is this philosophy that drives everything I do.

When I was asked if I would write a short essay for this collection, uncertainty flooded through me. Firstly, I didn't think anyone would be interested in reading about my philosophy in life and also my work in the community. Secondly, I have never felt comfortable writing about myself, I am an active and evaluative kind of person. I am still uneasy about writing this article, but I do feel that I would like to embrace this opportunity to share with you my collective work with the community.

In 2015, after many years of working as an executive mathematics consultant, I volunteered to become the CEO of SADACCA, the Sheffield African and Caribbean Community Association, a registered charity that has been in operation since 1955, and which now provides a wide range

of activities and services. This includes an education programme – which has been of particular benefit to women – and a variety of measures designed to tackle deficiencies in mainstream services in response to the cultural and social needs of the community, including day care facilities with a domiciliary care and lunch club for the elderly, a Saturday school and an advice service designed to cater for the needs of the African and Caribbean community. SADACCA Studios has professional recording studio facilities, production and rehearsal rooms and instruments, and music producers and recording engineers. All of this involves a great deal of effort with a very minimal and inadequate financial resource base.

It was a period of financial instability and inadequate funding leading to minimum service delivery to the community. Relations between the charity, its leadership, the local council and mainly the African and Caribbean community were at their lowest and reflected discontent, brought about by a

culmination of years of distrust and the loss of confidence between the local council and the African diaspora community.

A new direction of travel was urgently required.

SADACCA had its own relationship problems with the community. As Chief Executive, I received complaints, mainly from community members, about the quality of care they had received from staff at the organisation. For example, there was an increasing number of elderly people of African origin not receiving satisfactory care at the day care centre due to funding cuts from the local council.

I decided to approach leaders at the council to engage in meaningful conversation with the aim of creating a safe space where open and transparent discussion could happen. To my surprise, I realised that I was knocking on an open door. They were welcoming and very accommodating. I was also reassured at my first meeting that they, too, wanted to build an organisation which reflected diversity in the community. My engagement with city council leaders reduced the trust gap with the community hence creating opportunity for more engagement with the young and the elderly people from the African diaspora.

The objectives of our meeting had two aspects, firstly to establish a working group which comprised of the Council Community Team and wider community representatives. Together, we organised and delivered a series of events and other activities which are still ongoing. These initiatives were extremely successful. Not only did the number of participants from this community

increase significantly within a short period, which continued during subsequent years, but also the level of support from the council increased as well.

It is fair to say that up until this time the council staff knew very little about the different issues facing the African Diaspora community, or of the racial discrimination they were experiencing on a daily basis. Equally the African diaspora community knew very little about the council and their operations.

I was confident that I could facilitate the communication amongst diverse audiences. I was already committed to promoting justice and equality within the community and to ensuring that the most vulnerable had access to good quality care. One of my primary roles as community leader is the promotion of racial equality. It is also one of my professional duties not only to challenge injustice, promote fairness and equality, but also to ensure that we can all be instrumental in striving for the changes that we wish to see.

We put relationships and people first in everything we do and now have a real opportunity, in line with Sheffield City Council and the NHS five-year plan, to develop solutions that engage by providing innovative, appropriate services in the community for the community with a goal of creating happier, healthier and more engaged communities. As we have renovated and diversified our provision, we have further increased the number of people we are able to assist. We help roughly 300 people a week, responding to a variety of needs, and this number is set to grow further with the rise in living costs

and the ongoing impact of Covid-19. We also provide personal care to older people living in their own home in the community. Our SADACCA Daycare service is a social and healthcare provider for the African-Caribbean citizens of Sheffield and has won twice the Prestige Award for Community Care Centre of the Year in 2020 and 2021. Our services are focused on the wellbeing of this group, and the prevention of their social isolation. The service delivers, assists with and monitors their health needs through craft activities, day trips, health and nutrition workshops and signposting to other services.

When asked what piece of wisdom I would give, I always speak about the need for

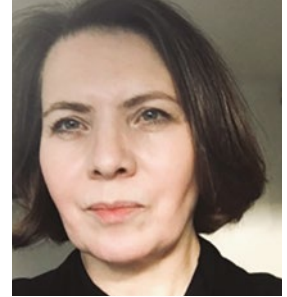
people to think more collectively. We need to constantly ask the question, 'What is it we can do together?' I grew up in the Kingdom of Bayangam in the Grassfields region of Cameroon where the words Muntu/Bantu/Ubuntu are commonly used.

It is the idea that I am only human if I recognise the humanity in others. It is this collective notion of life which I think we have lost.

**Olivier Tsemo is the CEO of SADACCA which provides community and health services for the African and Caribbean community in Sheffield.**



# THE POWER OF KINDNESS



**By Jenny Sinclair**

**A key message from our Putting Relationships First cell discussions has been how important it is to demonstrate and champion human qualities, for example kindness, warmth and honesty, in what we do. Here, Jenny Sinclair gives her view on kindness.**

‘We became more human – people were offering to help each other, delivering letters, doing errands and giving lifts...it wasn’t like that before. I think people had forgotten how to be kind.’

That comment on the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic was from my friend Mary. It took a crisis to remind us that being kind to each other is vital for our wellbeing. But that flush of neighbourliness during lockdown waned so quickly. Why do we keep on forgetting to be kind?

The answer, I think, lies in modernity, which has changed our culture both for good and for bad. We’ve seen vast improvements in efficiency and dramatic declines in discrimination. Some of us have seen huge prosperity. We can order anything directly into our homes. We enjoy the ‘freedom to choose.’

And yet, modern life is often unkind. Loneliness has increased, not just among the old but sharply among the young. More and more psychological pathologies are emerging, and our existential pain is increasingly medicalised.

Inequality has got a great deal worse. And as life has become more transactional, people trust their neighbours less.

We’ve been groomed into a false promise of freedom. A philosophy of hyper-individualism pits us against each other. The centralised state categorises us according to our rights, and the market commodifies us. The digital paradigm exacerbates this, as the algorithms of Big Tech (in both market and state) push us into ever narrower and ever more closed-off groups.

We’re increasingly estranged from each other’s different backgrounds and opinions. Schooled to focus on the self, we become less and less dependent on each other. Amidst this dehumanised mass of rights-bearing consumers, kindness struggles for attention.

For a few months in 2020, we were inspired by a surge of neighbourliness. It felt strange, but natural. However, it didn’t stick. The offers and expectations of kindness were too distant from the all-pervasive hyper-individualistic paradigm. We had forgotten how to be kind.

What is kindness anyway? In its etymology, it's related to 'kin', as in the kinship of family or nation. And, besides this sense of belonging, it also has roots in the Judeo-Christian concept of *chesed* which translates as 'loving-kindness' – giving oneself fully, with love and compassion.

Properly understood, kindness is ultimately loving-kindness: the practice of love, manifested in warmth, tenderness, compassion, honesty, generosity and self-sacrifice. These are virtues encouraged by interdependency – the less mutual responsibility we have, the less likelihood of developing the habits of kindness.

True kindness is not always obvious. When my son was eight, he commented on a very badly behaved boy in his class: 'Mum, Robert does his own ironing.' I was horrified: how could his parents be so negligent, and so unkind?

I was wrong. Robert's 'negligent' adopted parents understood that what this little boy needed was confidence. They knew it would be a kindness to help him develop competence. Robert is now a Head Chef in the Royal Navy.

Kindness should uphold the dignity of the person. 'Rescuing' someone from responsibilities is not kind. That aspect of kindness is easy to forget in a marketised society bent on pleasure and avoiding pain. Think of the #BeKind hashtag trends on Twitter, which encourages random acts of kindness, empathy and generosity.

But should we #BeKind to our friends no matter what they do? If someone is pursuing a foolish path, is it kinder to say nothing or to tell the truth? Which is more respectful? The loss of social credibility is

a risk, but we are in trouble when we place a higher value on loyalty than on right and wrong.

Authentic loving-kindness has a radical political edge. Because it makes us more interdependent and less reliant on economic products and government services. It builds relational power, strengthening our resistance against the powers that commodify and dehumanise.

But some activists intentionally misuse the meaning of '#BeKind' to close down debate. By framing opposing political positions as unkind, people are shamed into submission. This tactic of corrupting language is dishonest and coercive. It's also counterproductive, pushing dissent underground.

As Jonathan Haidt says, to develop sustainable solutions, opposing views need to be tested in the robust, free exercise of conscience and in mutual accountability. Kindness – in its true sense – is vital for intelligent politics.

Mary was right – we had forgotten how to be kind. We would do well to reacquaint ourselves with the fundamentals, as set out in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7:

'Love is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes.'

**Jenny Sinclair is founder director of Together for the Common Good, a UK charity dedicated to civic and spiritual renewal.**



# EMPOWERING PEOPLE THROUGH USER-LED ORGANISATIONS



**By Khatija Patel**

We have talked in our Putting Relationships First cell about the importance of recognising and showcasing the strengths in the people we serve and giving them leadership roles. Khatija Patel writes here about the role of user-led organisations in this respect.

I am always in awe of how the disabled people's user-led organisation that I am now CEO of came into being, and what can be achieved when people with lived experiences are empowered!

In 1997, it was the ambition of a group of disabled people to access services under one roof and receive up-to-date, accurate information, advice and guidance. Their ambitions were to develop person-centred approaches to care including developing, co-designing and delivering additional accessible services.

It helped that at that time there was a national movement to support the establishment of centres of independent living. However local challenges were many, yet the group persevered, challenged and negotiated with statutory bodies. In partnership, securing millions of pounds of funding to build a state-of-the-art Independent Living Centre.

When council officers showed them dozens of sites for the build, hidden away in industrial estates, that were not suitable in terms of access and transport links, the group refused these even with the threat of withdrawal of funding. Until a suitable site that ticked all accessible boxes was found.

During the build, disabled people worked with contractors, architects and stakeholders ensuring the design and infrastructure were inclusive and accessible. This included where light switches and door handles were placed, to the colour of paint on the walls.

The centre opened in 2000 and during the build the group developed a user-led membership governance structure, registered as a charity, changed its name from Sandwell DLC to 'Ideal for All' and secured further funding to deliver independent living services under the management of people who use the services.

The centre became a hub for local disabled people and is recognised nationally by government as an example of what can be achieved when working in partnership with communities. With councils and health professionals visiting from around the country.

By 2012, Ideal for All was delivering support to thousands of people, working within its user-led ethos, and developed further services and activities: an information, advice and guidance hub point, a drop-in duty service for low level mobility aids, an occupational therapy and a sensory equipment service. We also deliver strategic engagement and enablement, co-production, consultation on national strategies like benefit transformation and personalisation and supported the first person in Sandwell to receive their personal budget as a 'direct payment'.

Ideal for All brought in millions of pounds of investment into the borough, developing – to name but a few – three derelict pieces of land into accessible market gardens and therapeutic gardening spaces and trialling social prescribing as part of 'allotments on prescription'.

However, despite all the successes, lessons were learnt when austerity measures hit and 'market shaping' meant tendering for service delivery.

In 2013, the core work of the charity and the management of the Independent Living Centre were reviewed by local politicians and council officers, culminating in a substantial loss of funding and service delivery. Ideal for All were held to ransom over contracts and had to relinquish the leasehold of the Centre. This was a difficult time for the charity where we asked ourselves, 'Should we wind down or review options and carry-on invaluable work?'

The Board and staff (all on redundancy notices) rallied and worked hard to restructure and focus on core strengths, continuing to negotiate with the 'powers that be' and source additional opportunities. We also responded to the environment with a new way of working, ensuring the user-led ethos was embedded throughout.

As an employee, I saw the determination of disabled people coming together to challenge the authority's intended way forward, meet with politicians and officers,

develop petitions and even get their voices heard on local news channels. They supported me to take a leadership role in the charity, focusing on the core of our work to help people to live independent lives and be heard.

For me and the fantastic staff team it was a very difficult time, a roller coaster of emotions, managing conflicting priorities of job security and wanting to ensure the continuation of the invaluable work of the charity.

Six years on, resilience has shone through, and we have a thriving disabled people's user-led organisation, with doors remaining open during the pandemic, which has widened its geographical reach supporting around 2,000 people per year with Direct Payment Support Services and around 5,000 people with integrated health and wellbeing support, comprising peer support and condition management, community engagement and support, employment and skills development and mental health and well-being services, incorporating the fantastic horticultural sites into service delivery.

The charity has built long-lasting partnerships and is a part of established (co-founded) consortia, which means, together, we can reach further into communities delivering social and health care outcomes.

We are ambitious for our innovative social enterprise activities and the most recent business plan aims to achieve sustainability and ensure we are here as long as disabled people and people who need the support to be empowered exist.

What has struck me most – and it is still prevalent in our society today – is that too many disabled people and people who require support must challenge and fight for their statutory rights. It takes determined people who run user-led organisations which empower individuals and communities with information and support to show there is a better way and make life better for all of us.

**Khatija Patel is the CEO of Ideal for All, a user-led registered charity and social enterprise based in Sandwell and working to make life better for disabled, elderly and vulnerable people and their carers in the West Midlands and neighbouring regions.**

# SEEING PEOPLE AS THE SOLUTION NOT THE PROBLEM



**By Edel Harris**

**Edel Harris shares her insights here on how important it is to recognise and showcase the strengths in the people we serve and give them leadership roles, a key theme emerging from our Putting Relationships First cell.**

It is an interesting time for those of us working in the social care sector. And a very interesting time if you are an individual or a family who require some form of care or support.

Mencap's vision is for the UK to be the best place in the world to live a happy and healthy life, if you have a learning disability.

For this vision to be realised we need to ask – what sort of society do we want to live in? One where everyone who needs care and support to live a happy and healthy life gets the support they need when they need it, or a country where disabled and older people must be grateful for whatever they are given, often delivered by low-paid and undervalued workers operating within a system fixated on time and task.

As the parent of a young man with a learning disability who employs his own personal assistant, as a family we want a social care system that is genuinely personalised with the person firmly in the lead. A system that is based on individual strengths and assets not the current deficit culture within which we

operate. Let's think about measuring impact rather than input (if we need to measure something – my son is the only member of our family who has 'annual outcomes'!) and promote a system that encourages community innovation by providing the right environment for this to flourish.

On 1 December 2021 the UK Government published the White Paper entitled, *People at the Heart of Care*.

There is a lot to like in the White Paper – the way it was written with a focus on the 'I' statements was welcome, and the sentiments expressed throughout are worthy and hard to disagree with.

However, there is little acknowledgement of the current pressures – real pressures which we are experiencing right now – that are having a negative impact on people with a learning disability and their families.

Despite the warm words in the White Paper the overall sector narrative is still founded on words such as challenge, drain, deficit –

people who require support being viewed in a negative rather than a positive light and funding requirements seen as a drain on the public purse as opposed to an investment in people's lives and an investment in a vibrant and caring society.

I was surprised not to see more in the White Paper about commissioning practices, which are often inflexible, risk averse, inconsistent and lack a personalised approach to the type of support offered. Mencap is concerned that many local authorities continue to commission support based on the lowest cost rather than with a focus on other essential factors such as quality and based on achieving certain outcomes for the people who require the care and support. The trading in a commodity – an hour of care – does not chime with the 'people at the heart of care' intentions in the social care reform plans nor the principles of an integrated health and care system.

Users of social care and their families must help drive the design for local services, putting the individual at the centre by creating a commissioning model that focuses on outcomes rather than input and 'hours of care'. Give people greater choice to source the support that they want and, where someone has a personal budget, greater control over how this is spent. My son's PA recently took him on a trip to Old Trafford to watch a football match – I can't imagine that experience appearing in a social care contract tender process!

We need to refocus on prevention and early intervention. We know from our own family experience that a little support at the right time, determined by the person themselves, can go a long way and we must do more to

help people avoid crisis situations which result in expensive interventions or people ending up in in-patient units when this is not the best place for them to be.

People being in the lead also means ensuring everyone has access to information about their rights and the support that is available to them. This should include help to understand and exercise these rights, including support to challenge any decisions taken by others which impact on their life. We also need to invest in local decision-making and take a few risks to help enable people with a learning disability to flourish as active citizens. We understand the need to keep people safe, but this should be balanced with their right to live a happy and fulfilled life.

Mencap's current Big Plan (our organisational strategy) puts people with a learning disability in the lead. Whether that be at a personal level, where everyone receiving support decides what that support looks like and who should be involved in supporting them, or whether that is determining and leading our national campaigning activity.

As one of my colleagues who has a learning disability recently said: 'I love being part of Mencap's leadership team. I have learned so much but the best part has been contributing to the Big Plan and feeling like I am using my experience and skills to make a difference. I don't tell people that I meet now that I have a disability, I tell them that I am on the leadership team at Mencap. It feels good.'

**Edel Harris is the CEO of Mencap.**

# FREEING UP THE FRONT-LINE BY LIBERATING THE METHOD



**By Mark Smith**

**A key theme from our Putting Relationships First cell is the importance of giving freedom to the front line to build relationships so they can understand what's needed and do what's right. Mark Smith writes about what they've been doing in Gateshead to make this happen.**

It all started with a (wonderful) soul in the Council Tax Recovery section of Gateshead Council – let's call him Jim – who decided he would try to help a single mum – let's call her Juliet – who had fallen behind in the payments. The de facto purpose of his department was to get money from Juliet and others like her. And, if they don't pay, the normal method was just to send the bailiff round.

But Jim was one of the people working in that section who said, this isn't working, this doesn't feel right.

So he rang Juliet and just said, 'Hi, I'm from the Council, I'm not chasing you for the money, I just wondered what we could do to help?'

It turned out that Juliet was caught in a trap, and when he asked her this question she was so moved she cried. The underlying problem she was facing was that she needed to move because she was literally frightened of her neighbours, but because she owed a lot of rent, the Housing Company wouldn't let her. She

used to get by with two zero hours contracts, with her mum looking after the kids. But her mum decided she didn't want to babysit at night any longer because she was also really frightened of the neighbours. So Juliet had to reduce her hours and that's when her financial problems began.

Her mental health also declined, the children became disruptive at school, Juliet couldn't cope and the discussions with social services turned to the children being removed and also towards homelessness...

Jim learnt that if she could move, she had a chance ... more hours, more money, a new start. He started a train of events which not only gave Juliet and her family a new beginning but also changed how we work in his section and more widely in Gateshead too.

Jim called me about Juliet and we worked with the housing department to allow her to move. But as a result I also went down to the Council Tax Recovery section and

listened to lots of phone calls and we did a bit of research and discovered that only four per cent of the people we were chasing wouldn't pay and 96 per cent just couldn't pay, with not paying being a signal of a deeper problem, yet we treated both groups as if they were the same.

This was not something that could simply be tweaked, so we set up a small six-month prototype for doing things differently with a small team from Citizens' Advice, the Department of Work and Pensions and the Council Tax Recovery team. And we gave them the freedom to do things differently. There were constrained by two rules only – do no harm and don't break the law – and we told them they could do anything else they liked for a list of 40 people who would otherwise be about to get a bailiff visit.

We also 'liberated the method' – that's what we called it – giving them four operating principles or freedoms:

- Front-line authority to make decisions in their work, without having to escalate things to my office.
- No assessments. Instead, they should ask people 'what can we do for you?' and try to discover what a good life looks like to them.
- No referrals – because we know that this just leads to people going round and round in circles. Instead, the team pooled expertise so they could establish a relationship with the people who weren't paying council tax and solve the underlying problems together.
- Measure only to learn and improve, not to keep scores or to make a point. If we learn something's working, that's great, and if it isn't, we adapt.

We gave that team a pot of money and we gave them six months and asked them to tell us what they learnt. The team found that, like Juliet, the people they were working with were already struggling, many had been going round in circles for many years, moving from service to service in desperation. They were able to get 70 per cent of those they worked with out of it – for example, into work, into education and onto the benefits they were entitled to. They also built connections locally, working with lots of third sector organisations as partners because they know a lot more than we do about what's going on.

We've since tried to develop the same approach through homelessness and through area-based working and it's setting the platform for reform across the council and – I'd like to think – beyond.

What we've found is that those two rules and four principles have really stayed with us. They haven't been adapted. What we're now trying to do is make that much more normal and we're finding it is beginning to get some traction, though the pandemic hasn't helped.

The truth is Jim is a hero but we also have buildings full of Jims whom we must set free before they give up, leave and take up less stressful and frustrating careers. And there are many Juliets out there whose lives can be helped if we 'liberate the method'.

**Mark Smith is Director of Public Service Reform for Gateshead Council.**

The image features a hand-drawn illustration of a tree with a central circle containing the text "SHARING AND BUILDING POWER". The tree is drawn with simple, dark brown outlines on a light green background. The central circle is also drawn with simple outlines and contains the text in a white, sans-serif font. The background is filled with a pattern of light green, curved lines that resemble leaves or branches. The overall style is simple and illustrative.

SHARING  
AND BUILDING  
POWER



# POWER AND SOLIDARITY: INSIGHTS FROM ENTWINED CONVERSATIONS



By Sue Tibballs and Sarah Thomas

In our Sharing and Building Power cell, we've been exploring how we can distribute power more equitably, as it lies in too few hands, and can make more of the power we have to change things for the better. Sue Tibballs and Sarah Thomas, our thought leaders for the cell, write here about what they've learnt from taking part and from the Sheila McKechnie's Foundation's wider work on power.

Over the past two years, the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK) has had the privilege of co-hosting a conversation about building and sharing power for the Better Way network. Meanwhile, we have been engaged in our own separate but related inquiry into power in civil society, the Power Project. Our guide, *It's All About Power*, published mid-March, draws together insights and tools developed during the project. In this essay, we hope to share some of what we've learnt through these entwined journeys.

## The voiceless, or the unheard?

The Better Way is a network across sectors committed to changing things for the

better. Building and sharing power is one of the four behaviours a Better Way has identified that how we can help drive practical action. The Power Project has a more specific focus: we were tasked with exploring the question, 'How can we grow the voice of those with lived experience of poverty and inequality in social change?' On the face of it, this was a good and simple question. But, in conversations with people from across civil society, it became clear it was not. In fact, in trying to answer it, every aspect of the question itself was challenged – from the language that frames it to the assumptions it reveals.

Firstly, it is simply untrue to assume that those with direct, first-hand experience of social inequalities are not already driving

change. From Joeli Brearley's Pregnant Then Screwed campaign, to social housing activist Kwajo Tweneboa, people with first-hand experience of all kinds of injustice are standing up and making a difference in all kinds of ways. We heard some brilliant examples, too, in our conversations with Better Way members. Not least, from the brilliant Lady Unchained and Amanda Hailes, members of Sound Delivery Media's Spokesperson Network, who shared their very different approaches to creating change – from poetry to joining a board.

The language of 'lived experience' – at least when that label was applied by us – seemed to assume an 'us' and a 'them' in a troubling way. Not everyone we spoke to wanted to be defined as a 'person with lived experience'. Many reported having both 'lived' and 'learned' experience. Others told us that focusing on individual stories of hardship meant the many other qualities and experiences they can bring were in danger of being overlooked – along with the systemic, political causes of their situation.

Beyond issues of language, we have heard that the formal social sector is not always a welcoming place, and examples of genuine, equitable partnerships with those outside the sector are rare. Stories of lived experience are, too often, used in ways that are tokenistic or even exploitative. As a result, many people prefer to pursue change outside of formal organisations, to ensure their mission is not compromised and their experiences are not co-opted.

The kinds of assumptions and practices our question revealed shore up an old model of charity and philanthropy that has no place in a contemporary social sector. Nevertheless,

our conversations with the Better Way network and many others have left us feeling optimistic. The challenges we face may be great, but there are a great many people willing to take up the challenge.

## Many ways to share and build power

Our own conversations on the Power Project, and those of the Sharing and Building Power cell, hinge on one very important provocation: we need to think differently about power.

We talk a lot about power in society and in social change – speaking truth to power, devolving power, empowering others. Each of these statements assumes a binary notion of those with power and those without. But power is not static, and it is not a zero-sum game. We may find we have more or less power in different contexts, or with different people. Even world leaders often report that the systems they operate within mean they don't have the power others assume they have. It is true, also, that power is accumulative. Access to power tends to beget more access to more power. But if we begin to see power as something that is dynamic, fluid and shifting – more like a current or a flow that surrounds and runs through us all – this means that each of us can choose to use the power we have consciously and purposefully to create change, even if only in a small way.

This is a very profound shift, which the tools and insights in *It's All About Power* are designed to support. Our conversations with Better Way members over 2021 reaffirmed that, when we begin to think

differently about power, opportunities and routes for change are everywhere. For example, Phoebe Tickell and Athol Hallé asked us to experience the power of imagination in transformative change both for individuals and for society.

In 2021, we also heard from those within the so-called institutions of power themselves and what can be done to challenge the abuses of power. Kristian Tomblin from Devon County Council described the sensitive work happening there to share and build power within his institution and Jill Baker, who has worked in a number of leadership roles in the public and voluntary sector, talked about the importance of ‘servant leadership’. Sonya Ruperal explained how it is possible to build equitable and inclusive partnerships, despite the power imbalances that exist.

We have learned that sharing and building power is more of a recipe than a check list. There are some key, non-negotiable ingredients – paying people for their time, taking action to support diversity on boards and in decision-making forums, rather than simply providing a seat at the table. Simplifying processes, de-coding language, sharing resources. The rest is up to you and the people you work with to decide together. Explore how power manifests in yourself and in the groups and organisations you are part of, use the ingredients at your disposal and make a start. Perhaps most importantly, we have learned that sharing and building power means putting into practice the other elements of the Better Way model – listening to each other, putting relationships first and joining forces.

## Reversing the question

As we reached the end of our own inquiry, we made the decision to reverse our question completely. Rather than ‘how can we share power with others?’ we asked, ‘How can the social sector find ways to work in meaningful solidarity with people and communities?’

This reversal was significant for us. The onus of change is on the organisations themselves – not in response to some perceived lack in people or communities, but in acknowledgement that the burden of solving social issues cannot lie solely on the shoulders of those most affected. Solidarity is the key word.

The social sector can no longer act as the ‘hero saviour’ of Victorian philanthropic tradition. Instead, it needs to reimagine its work as an ally and partner. We believe that by embedding social justice – and an understanding of power for deeper solidarity – in every part of the social change process, it can be more relevant, effective, and authentic. The result will be something that we sorely need in this moment – more human connections, stronger communities, and hope for change.

**Sue Tibballs is CEO of the Sheila McKechnie Foundation, and Sarah Thomas is leading SMK’s Power Project.**

# LISTEN TO THE VOICE OF PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE



**By Amanda Hailes**

**We've heard how vital it is to increase our own power by challenging self-limiting beliefs and practices and unlocking the power of lived experience in our discussions on sharing and building power.**

**Amanda Hailes writes about her own experience of doing this here.**

Living with any disadvantage can be incredibly difficult.

Disadvantages such as childhood trauma, poverty, domestic abuse, mental ill health, addiction, coercion, exploitation, losing custody of children, homelessness, violence, sexual violence, street prostitution, being involved in the criminal justice system and imprisonment.

Most of these disadvantages come with labels, stereotypes and stigma.

When disadvantages become layered on top of each other, becoming multiple disadvantages, they can become suffocating. Each disadvantage ricocheting off the next until it becomes impossible to escape them.

I know what it's like to try and survive multiple disadvantages because the list of disadvantages above are my disadvantages. The disadvantages I have faced throughout my life.

The impact of struggling to survive all my disadvantages became overwhelming. I'd asked for help and support from the services so many times throughout my life, going round and round in circles, with no help and support. I ended up spinning in circles, my life spiraling out of control.

I felt so totally alone, my mental ill health was impacting on everything in my life, and it became frightening, not knowing who to turn to and feeling totally helpless. I felt I had been discarded by the services and discarded by society.

I ended up losing everything, my children, my family, my home and myself.

My life has changed so much over these past few years, I escaped homelessness, I escaped street-based sex work, I escaped crack cocaine and heroin addiction, I escaped.

For over a decade I was a voluntary outreach worker in the red-light district in Hull. I

handed out coffee and condoms to the women working the streets, knowing nothing had changed. Women being failed by services and systems that were still broken, in fact over recent years it had got even worse.

But I didn't know what to do.

My life echoed the other women's lives and their lives echoed my life.

In this country, thousands of women are struggling to survive not only multiple disadvantages, but women are also having to survive going from one service, to the next, and to the next to be 'signposted' to the next and back to the first and put on overly long waiting lists, going round and round in circles, with no real help or support. Support so desperately needed.

Multiple disadvantages cannot be tackled one by one with each service doing their own individual thing. Services must work together using a trauma informed approach, employ those with lived experience and look at bridging those gaps so women aren't labelled – hard to reach, marginalised, having chaotic or transient lifestyles or be beyond help – when in fact it's the services that are hard to reach, the services that are chaotic.

We need to support women far better before their lives reach crisis point.

Too many women are dying, too many women are being failed by broken services and by broken systems, and we need to give better help and support women who are struggling to survive multiple disadvantages.

The system and in turn the services are outdated and were conceived and introduced in the 1940s.

We need to look at a totally new approach for modern day Britain, because over the past eight decades we have changed as a society and therefore society's needs have changed. This should be reflected in the services that people need today and into the future.

In 2017, myself and 11 other women from Hull, with lived experience of street-based sex work and working and surviving the streets, published a book called *An Untold Story*, containing poetry, prose, stories, artwork and photos of our experiences, which was funded by the Lankelly Chase Foundation.

We each had to use a pseudonym because of the stigma we might face.

It was during this time that I found my voice – the voice of lived experience – and to tell you the truth, I haven't shut up since!

But I felt, if I was going to challenge that stigma, I couldn't do it behind a fake name, so I choose to use my own name.

I speak for the women without a voice, women who are silenced because of fear or stigma, the women who are disregarded and discarded.

Our little collective, *An Untold Story – Voices* – four women including myself and Susie with lived experience and Emma and Anna who are incredible friends, colleagues and advocates – highlights multiple disadvantages, which we have done in a

creative way, with the book, a photographic exhibition 'Absence of Evidence' in collaboration with Henry/Bragg Art and more recently a gallery exhibition and short film made by Other Cinemas, at Humber Street Gallery in Hull.

We talk honestly and openly, even if that honesty is brutal, using our lived experience, our different perspectives, our viewpoints of an often secretive, underground and dangerous world, in our own words. We do this to shape policy and practice, legislation and systems change. We push for the voices of lived experience to be heard.

By having the voices of lived experience, occupational experience and decision makers around the same table, each bringing their own expertise and each having a voice, we can begin to rebuild the new foundations needed to support and build these new systems and services.

**Amanda Hailes is part of the Hull-based women's collective *An Untold Story – Voices*, campaigning for women's rights and social justice, and is a spokesperson for *Sound Delivery Media* and a trustee of the *Lankelly Chase Foundation*.**



# HOW TO BUILD EQUITABLE, INCLUSIVE ALLIANCES



By Sonya Ruparel

The importance of building wider alliances around a common cause, ensuring these reflect the full diversity of our society and are equitable and inclusive, has been underlined by discussions in our Sharing and Building Power cell. Sonya Ruparel shares insights from her work on how to do this at Turn2Us and elsewhere.

Turn2us, where I now work, is in its 125<sup>th</sup> year, having been created by a radical Victorian Philanthropist, Elizabeth Finn, as a grant-making organisation for 'distressed gentlefolk'. Radical philanthropy in 2022 looks very different, and grant-making to those whose rights have been denied should be very different to how it looked 125 years ago. Our organisations carry society within them, so we must take individual journeys to find better ways of working to improve our societies and organisations, sharing these with others as we do in a Better Way and learning from each other. Here are some insights in relation to sharing power and collaboration that I have been learning on my journey about how to build equitable and inclusive alliances around a common cause. Three principles shine through.

## 1. The 'What' mustn't trump the 'How'

In much of the work that I have done in collaboration, there is often a tension between the 'what' and the 'how' of what we do. If we only focus on what we are trying to achieve, we will lose people along the way and if we only focus on the how (for example, shifting power) organisations and people will quickly drift away as it will start to feel as though nothing is being achieved. There does need to be a joint purpose that everyone involved in the collaboration is trying to achieve, even it feels too large and complex to tackle. Let me give you an example...

A group of grant makers (Turn2us, Buttle and Smallwood Trust) are collaborating to develop a programme to bring our collective grant-making expertise to tackle issues of gendered poverty. It took us over a year to develop this purpose together, in conversation with different members of our teams, and boards, with different approaches, and conversation diversions into ‘how’ we work together. This hasn’t been an easy journey, and we started off with four organisations – along the way, one organisation’s Board realised, as time went on, that they weren’t yet ready to shift their ways of working and finance a project with unclear outcomes. It’s a leap of faith in the process to not have a clear intended outcome from day one of the design of a programme and to allow it to be designed genuinely in co-production. We intend to continue to define the purpose as we bring in more partners and co-produce the programme – and ‘how’ we do that sets the foundations of good working practice among the partners and helps us to build trust. It hasn’t been smooth, and we don’t expect it to be smooth moving forward and we know it means an investment of time to practice the ‘how’ of working together. This may slow us down but we anticipate that ‘what’ we achieve will be stronger, more impactful, and more relevant to those the programme is for.

My learning through this experience has been that clearly focusing on the ‘how’ can be more inclusive, increase diversity of engagement, thought and leadership and increase ownership of the ‘what’.

## 2. Setting up with power in mind

If an alliance is set up concretely from the beginning with a hierarchical structure that puts those with power at the decision making table from day one, it is much harder to shift it later. In the Feminist Humanitarian Network I initiated, we agreed that from the beginning 70 per cent of participants needed to be from local and national women’s organisations where power needed to shift. The humanitarian space and system is dominated by a patriarchal western-led model, and decisions over resources are made primarily in the global North. It was unacceptable to the members of the network to replicate problematic systemic power structures in the setting up of a new feminist space: decision making had to be closest to those who were most marginalised and overlooked by the system. Arguably many international and national organisations are facing the same challenges of how to shift decision-making to where people are most affected, when they have been set up on a power-centric model and when resources are being further squeezed and increasingly centralised. Here, my learning has been that to have a strong power analysis at the start of an initiative can help to identify ways of governing the initiative that challenge – rather than reinforce – negative power structures.



### 3. Accountability in relationships

As we build partnerships and relationships, accountability should be at their heart. In Turn2us we ran a Covid response programme with a range of partners, and at the centre of our collaboration we developed an accountability framework that held us, and the other partners, to account for our actions in relation to the programme. It held us, as the funding organisation, to account for our actions so that we used our power responsibly within the programme. This was the first time we had used this model in a partnership, and we hoped that it would enable us to share power. Our programme accountability areas under which we created specific commitments were:

- transparency, information and two-way communication;
- participation and inclusion;
- monitoring, evaluation and learning;
- complaints, feedback and response;
- use of resources.

Our learning from this was that as a new 'tool' in a partnership it took some time to embed and gain understanding. However, the partners were complimentary about the partnership model that we set up and we felt comfortable holding each other to account. Moving forward we want to improve this practice, roll it out more broadly in our partnerships and set up an

organisational accountability framework that sits alongside our new strategy.

Perhaps there is a future where there is an accountability framework for all grant makers ... or even for the charity sector.

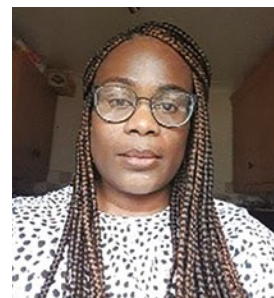
So where will this learning take Turn2us, our partnerships and our drive to continue to find a Better Way to contribute to ending financial hardship?

Acknowledging that we, as individuals in Turn2us, are not experts in understanding everyone's financial hardship is hard, but important, and allows us to be open to deeper co-production, working alongside people, communities, and their organisations who are facing the grossest injustices to listen, learn and continuously improve.

We will continue to learn from the expertise, initiatives and ambitions of the Better Way network and contribute our own learning and thinking because we know that we can only succeed if we work collaboratively and keep learning.

**Sonya Ruparel is Director of Programmes and Partnerships at Turn2us.**

# BUILDING ALLIANCES AROUND A COMMON CAUSE



**By Lara Rufus-Fayemi**

One of the themes emerging from our Sharing and Building Power cell has been the importance of building wider alliances around a common cause, ensuring these reflect the full diversity of our society and are equitable and inclusive. Lara Rufus-Fayemi shares insights from the London Borough of Newham.

## Collaboration is the new normal...

Joining the London Borough of Newham in April last year has been both an exciting and exhilarating experience all in one! A paradoxical statement, I know, but joining the Council in the midst of a global pandemic, with the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic being more severe in Newham than anywhere else in the country, you'll understand my opening sentence. Newham, which has historically been seen as the hub of East London in terms of culture and tourism, tragically experienced the highest death rate due to Covid-19 in England and Wales. Working together with local people and organisations was a step in the right direction and one that would bear much fruit.

Having spent several years in the voluntary sector and a further five years at the National Lottery Community Fund, I was

really heartened by the Council's ethos of having 'people at the heart of everything we do', which suitably chimes with the Lottery's 'People in the Lead' ambition.

This was duly demonstrated by the Council and its partners; residents and local businesses were supported through these extraordinary times and circumstances. For example, the Council immediately launched the #HelpNewham programme to deliver support to residents who were most in need, supporting vulnerable residents to gain access to supermarket delivery slots at Iceland or Tesco, arranging home delivery of food and essential items (such as toothpaste and sanitary items), as well as having someone to talk to via our befriending telephone chat service.

We all know that the pandemic really shone the spotlight on some of the stark inequalities and inequity experienced by

disadvantaged groups. As a result of this, albeit inadvertently, new collaborations have emerged, enabling multidisciplinary groups to begin to come together to construct a systems approach, for example, to the complex immigration issues at play in the borough.

Newham contributed to the formation of several alliances – by which I mean an informal partnership between a group of organisations for mutual benefit – such as Newham’s Anti-Poverty alliance, seeking to identify transformational change for an all-borough approach, working across different themes. Newham’s Social Welfare Alliance, to give another example, focused on supporting all front-line workers in the borough and centred on understanding the issues and sign posting individuals to the correct advice. The Newham Food Alliance is another example, where we worked collaboratively with 33 cross-sector organisations within and beyond Newham to deliver over 200,000 parcels to those who couldn’t afford to get food and supported up to 6,000 households at any one time. Overall, with every £1 the council invested we got £10 worth of food for residents, at a total value of £3.9 million.

All in all, this has resulted in Newham Council having much better, more productive and richer relationships with the voluntary, community and faith sectors.

Newham Council is now building on some of the groundswell and the momentum that has emerged in the midst of these adverse circumstances, creating a spirit of collaboration and solidarity, to collectively develop an approach to achieve better

outcomes for the borough, as well as test and learn new initiatives. For example, we’ve worked with University College London to create Newham Sparks, with the ambition to create many open data jobs in the borough and be a leader in this field. In recent months, Newham has also, in partnership with London Funders, formed the Newham Funders’ Forum – a collaboration of between 15 to 20 diverse (in size and scope) funders which are all investing in Newham – with the purpose of being able to share insights and explore opportunities to discuss how we might better support greater collaboration in the future.

Importantly, the borough is spearheading many initiatives which are designed to be equitable and inclusive and give local people power. For example, we have local Community Assemblies, one of the largest participatory budgeting programmes in the country, where local groups can decide how funds should be spent in the borough. We have also established the first Permanent Standing Citizens assembly in the country, currently focused on developing 15-minute neighbourhoods. The Council has recently worked with University College London, Compost and other partners to train up residents to be researchers in their communities and are developing a Citizen Science Academy.

It’s clear that in these strange times, we can no longer afford to work in isolation. None of the above initiatives could have happened in silos or in a bubble. We hear a lot about the ‘new normal’. For me ‘collaboration’ is the new normal!

During this process, I've learnt a lot not just about the importance of alliances but also how to make them work. My top tips for effective collaborations would be in the form of an acronym PERROIL:

**P**eople – the main ingredient: it's going to take people and their commitment to a common purpose to make collaborations work!

**E**nergy – needs passion and optimism to get things started.

**R**espect – respect people's views and experiences.

**R**isk – don't be afraid to take risks and trial new initiatives.

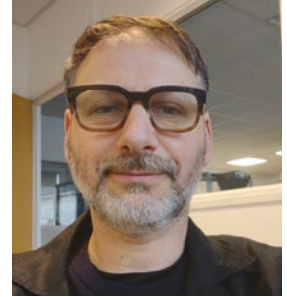
**O**pen – people appreciate openness and honesty, the good the bad and the warts too.

**I**nvestment – whether that is time or funding or both – whatever it takes to make the partnership work.

**L**isten – don't just hear, but really listen to what people have to say!

**Lara Rufus-Fayemi is the Strategic Partnerships and Engagement Manager for the London Borough of Newham.**

# THE POWER OF IMAGINATION



**By Athol Hallé**

**The use of imagination to engage people who feel powerless and create alternative futures is a theme emerging from our Sharing and Building Power cell. Athol Hallé writes about his experience of this here.**

I began to realise how impactful the power of imagination could be when I was running The Engagement Programme with Cardboard Citizens, a theatre company where all the actors were people who had experienced homelessness, back in the year 2000.

We specialised in a technique called Forum Theatre, created by the Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal. We did not put on shows in theatres, but rather in homeless services. We would go into a hostel, take over the lounge, turn off the TV, and put a on a play – often to the initial disgruntlement of residents, but that soon changed once the actors began sharing their stories.

With Forum Theatre the protagonist is a character that can relate to the lives of the audience, so with Cardboard Citizens shows this was always someone who was homeless and the story was based on the real-life experiences of the actors on the streets of London.

The protagonist faces challenging situations and difficult characters, getting themselves into deeper and deeper trouble, ending in a

crisis. One play ‘A Ridge Too Far’ saw the lead, Freddie, come up against an impatient benefits officer, get himself thrown off a training course and when faced with an unreasonable key worker he ended up kicked out of his hostel and back on the street.

Then we replayed the show, asking the audience to take part. If they want Freddie’s life to turn out differently, then they have to stop the play – get up on stage, take the role of Freddie and redo the scene – trying something different, with the actors improvising around the audience member.

You think no one is going to get up – but if they don’t intervene, they have to watch Freddie get in trouble again, and because people cared about him, someone always jumped up and shouted ‘STOP!’ People would attempt all manner of imaginative interventions – occasionally losing their temper with the benefits officer and making the situation worse but, between them, the audience always seemed to be able to get a result for Freddie.

The central message is that you can’t change the difficult situation or the challenging characters.

The only thing you can change is your own behaviour, but even with just that, there was a lot you could achieve. We tried to make the connection that if people can imagine things working out for Freddie, why not for themselves?

The key was following up that spark of imagination into tangible change. At first, I tried handing out leaflets after each show, promoting various opportunities, but as people barged passed me and up to the actors – their peers – we realised that was where the power was. People would have amazing conversations about imagining a better life and sorting things out.

Then, taking it further, we thought that leaflets were not enough to grab hold of the momentum, so we trained the actors as advocates, who offered there and then straight after the show to accompany people to go and attend services.

Taking that small crack of light opened up by imagination and turning it into direct action – for many it became a real turning point.

A few years later, at Groundswell, we were focusing on service user involvement and peer research. All our research was pointing to the fact that health was the biggest unaddressed issue for people experiencing homelessness. Despite it being free to access health services, people were not making it to appointments. Missing out on primary care meant letting health deteriorate, ending up in acute care instead – an expensive use of health services and at great personal suffering.

Now, imagination is not always inventing something new. Sometimes the best innovations are recycling existing ideas but putting them in a different context. So, I tried resurrecting the peer advocacy element of The Engagement Programme at Cardboard Citizens and applying it to health. We didn't have a

play, so we ran health promotion sessions in hostels and day centres. The peers who ran the sessions, all people who had been homeless themselves, offered to take people to health appointments there and then.

From day one, Homeless Health Peer Advocacy (HHPA) just worked. In the first five years it went from a small pilot with 100 appointments in one venue into a full service commissioned by ten London boroughs, supporting people for over 10,000 appointments, with over 60 volunteer advocates who had been homeless going on to get jobs. Since I left Groundswell, HHPA has developed further – now expanding across the country, as described in the essay by Lucy Holmes in this collection.

Now I am at TDC – a community development and youth work charity in Brighton which brings people together from under-served and excluded communities to create a more inclusive, healthy and resilient city. Unlocking the power of imagination will again be crucial as we seek to rebuild community life after the devastations of Covid.

**Athol Hallé is the Chief Executive of TDC, The Trust for Developing Communities, a community development charity in Brighton & Hove that leads a citywide partnership that tackles inequality and runs the award-winning Brighton Streets detached youth work project. Prior to that as Chief Executive of Groundswell for over ten years, Athol oversaw the creation of the Homeless Health Peer Advocacy project, with previous roles at Cardboard Citizens and Amnesty International UK and a few years as a support worker. Athol is also a Trustee of Community Base, a community building in central Brighton.**

# 'SERVANT LEADERSHIP': WHAT I'VE LEARNT ABOUT POWER



By Jill Baker

One theme emerging from the Sharing and Building Power cell during 2021 is the value of practising 'servant leadership', releasing power in others, and stopping others – and ourselves – from abusing power. Jill Baker gives her reflections here.

When I was asked to talk about power at a Better Way network meeting my initial reaction was 'Me?' What do I know about power and where would I start?' But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that actually, I have experiences of power across the spectrum of power-less to power-ful and as a result have formed views and practices that stem from those experiences.

If you work in the social sector, creating the changes you want to see can sometimes feel like an impossible task- it's too difficult, it's too big, it will take too long. But I and just about everyone I have ever worked with have effected some change, because they have chosen to work hard and use the power they have – however little that may be – to create a difference. I have of course worked with many, many wonderful people in the course of my career and all of them have done this, to a certain extent. Sometimes, though, the power they have gets in the way or goes to their head and

they inadvertently create another power imbalance between themselves and the people they seek to help, usually by the way they behave or think they should behave.

I believe that everyone has power – we often talk about people being 'powerless', meaning they are unable to effect change in their lives, but the word is power-less, not power-none. Even those people who experience multiple and complex barriers in their lives still have some power even if they feel like they don't, or can't use it. What that has meant for me in my practice is that when I have considerably more power than they do, it is my responsibility not to share it, but to actively give it away, as much as I can. That has got me into bother with others – usually those with more power than me – because it means you do things that are different and sometimes go against the norms and it also means calling things out when you see power being used badly – even when that's hard to do.

Early on in my career I came across a book that talked about 'servant leadership' and it really resonated with me – the notion that if you have a position of power, authority or leadership, your job is to always think how you serve those you lead, not the other way round. When working out how or what to do, I often go back to that question – who am I serving here? The people I am actually here to serve or the authority that oversees the systems that keep those people in the places authority sometimes wants them? Checking my behaviours and actions are for the former not the latter means that generally I am able to give away the power. It means asking questions such as 'what would you like to happen next' rather than making statement such as 'this is what I'm going to do for you' – which keeps power with me, it doesn't give it to them.

It also means acting with humility, respect and – for me – with humour. Those behaviours help me to communicate more effectively with others who may think my power means I am somehow different to them.


Here's an example from children's social care – when systems lead good people to do things that make no sense but they do them because the system dictates it and they feel power-less to change it. Take the care system – the system tells us one way to keep children safe is to remove them from the things that are causing them harm. Seems sensible but actually that does not empower anyone in the situation to change – it just moves people about. We know that often the outcomes for children in this situation are very poor – but we keep doing it because that's what the system tells us to do. When we started to do something

different the biggest resistance was from staff who felt they would be blamed by 'the powers that be' if it went wrong. As one of the 'powers that be' I was able to use that to empower them to do differently and know they would be supported, whatever happened. It was hard and took time because they were disempowered by the system too. And the outcome was better for everyone – the child, the parent and the workers.

In my current roles I am in several positions of considerable power, across sectors and in roles both paid and unpaid and I challenge myself to give away my power and call out abuse of power wherever I can. I don't always get it right, but always trying means, for me, using the power I have to make a positive difference to someone else.

**Jill has over 30 years' experience of working in the charity, health and local authority sectors specialising in children's social care, criminal justice and community development. She is Director of Development at Lloyds Bank Foundation, a Churchill Fellow, a Trustee of the Community Foundation for Tyne and Wear and Northumberland and is also a Non-Executive Director of the Newcastle-upon-Tyne Hospitals Foundation NHS Trust and a Mentor for the Girl's Network. She lives in the North East and is the parent of grown up twins and the G word to three little boys!**



The image features a bright yellow background with a faint, stylized globe in the center. Two hands are depicted in a simple, line-art style. One hand is positioned at the top right, with fingers slightly curled as if reaching down. The other hand is at the bottom left, with fingers spread out as if reaching up. The hands are rendered in a light brown color with white outlines. The text "LISTENING TO EACH OTHER" is centered in the middle of the image in a white, hand-drawn, sans-serif font.

LISTENING TO  
EACH OTHER

# 'RADICAL LISTENING' IS THE WAY TO RADICAL CHANGE



**By Karin Woodley**

In our Listening to Each Other cell, we've been exploring the importance of listening, particularly to those least heard, as a means of finding out what's not working and discovering what will. Karin Woodley, our thought leader for this cell, has been making the case for a practice of 'radical listening', as she explains here.

I've come to realise that we're in a state of cognitive dissonance because we champion equality and social justice while clinging to a social change model that is largely philanthropic and rooted in paternalism. Our model is driven by social benevolence, funding availability and ballot box short-termism rather than respect for and the protection of people's fundamental human rights. As a result, it neither tackles the root causes of structural inequity nor gets to the crux of historic and systemic neglect.

Systems-disrupting change requires the collective humility and bravery to accept that there is a stark fault line in the knowledge we use to formulate policy and configure services. The pandemic has shone a spotlight on our failures and rising inflation, on-going Brexit uncertainties, global warming and the war in the Ukraine mean that more and more people are experiencing deteriorating living conditions

and inter-related social and economic disparities across multiple aspects of their lives. The need to transform is urgent!

While we fail to reach people who feel their voices are unheard, fail to create the conditions needed for them to meaningfully participate, and continue to filter what we hear from them with supposition, stereotypes and judgments, we cannot drive transformational social change. Only once we accept that our traditional knowledge collection methods are insufficient and partisan will we be able to recalibrate, reach beyond reaction to symptoms, and formulate concrete shared-power strategies that can successfully address the underlying causes of social inequity.

'Learning to listen' and 'listening to understand' are fundamental and radical components of this change path because

they help us understand how the way we work and our structures and systems enhance the status quo. It's imperative that we fill our knowledge gap by generating the experiential knowledge needed to tackle entrenched material and relational inequality.

Radical listening is a powerful tool on this journey because it nurtures relational social change. It is nuanced, empathetic, intentional and non-judgemental and focuses on building equitable and trusting relationships. By emphasising learning and flexibility, and enabling people to tell their real stories, share their real experiences and formulate their own solutions, radical listening captures the spirit and energy of the people our social structures exclude.

As a professional skill, radical listening pushes us to confront the way conceptually and pragmatically we communicate so that we can reposition ownership of the conversation to those we are listening to. It builds our capacity to tackle the listening bias created by embedded power imbalances between us and our philanthropically described 'beneficiaries'. We develop a new kind of attentiveness and self-control and build our capacity to listen for the content, meaning, and feeling in what people have to say.

Embracing this new skill is difficult (i.e. saying less) and extremely disciplined (i.e. being silent), but it can reap enormous rewards by improving the internal performance of our organisations through better trust, openness, decision-making, conflict resolution and problem-solving. It also helps us to be less defensive about the 'way we've always done things'. Cultivating curiosity and creating safe

and inclusive environments for exploring new ideas are tenets of good leadership and team working. Leaders and teams who are skilled at radical listening will be more human-centred in their interactions with each other and the people with whom they work. They will be more successful.

Nurturing relational change driven by people most affected by social inequity poses several significant challenges. We frequently talk about being 'mistrusted' – which in itself is victim blaming – but we have failed to tackle the institutional practices that have systematically prevented the recruitment and advancement of leaders and staff from diverse backgrounds and with diverse lived experiences without them being treated as a token minority. This failure means that we have allowed our organisations to replicate the power imbalances within society and create barriers between us and the people we need to 'hear', ignoring the benefits of shared experience for social perception, credibility, empathy and confidence.

Our ability to create safe and welcoming environments for radical listening activity will always be undermined by this lack of diversity. So, while we tackle this problem, we need to develop partnerships that ensure the people we need to listen to can be heard by others who share aspects of their culture and experiences. Radical listening is an intensely human interaction and as such the ability to ask sensitive questions that elicit and uncover unmet concerns is paramount.

We have a fairly rich arsenal of engagement, consultation and research formats including citizen assemblies, focus groups and participatory research that can provide

the frameworks for building trust, organic conversations and radical listening – provided we remember that we are not the centre of the activity and we are not defensive.

Fully embracing the fact that the people we need to hear are the experts, not us, is another challenge. We're not used to listening without trying to get to what we perceive to be important, without jumping to conclusions, without interrupting and interjecting with our own opinions, and without steering conversations so that they respond to questions raised by our funders. Yet when we hand over control, our categorisation of people's experience according to historic service definitions and silos becomes redundant. Most people share their needs, challenges and goals through a more holistic, complex and interrelated lens – people simply do not define themselves in the way we do.

In the end, we have to unlearn our current ways of working and embrace relational social change driven by experiential knowledge. As Stephen Hawking said, 'The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge'. It's time to shed the illusion of knowledge and the shackles of benevolence and paternalism. It's time to ditch the failing social protection mechanisms and safe and repetitive formulae we've spent such a long time designing and re-designing.

It's time for us to listen, reflect, bear witness and absorb.

**Karin Woodley CBE is Chief Executive of Cambridge House and Chair of the Race Equality Foundation.**



# NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF REALLY LISTENING



## By Samantha Abram

One conclusion from our Listening to Each Other cell is that we should set aside regular time and space to listen with an open mind, reach out to people who are not ‘in the room’, and act on what we hear. Here Samantha Abram reflects on her experience in Wigan of doing just that.

I still remember, vividly, one of the most poignant moments of my time as a PTS (Person-led, Transitional, Strength-based) coach. I had been coaching for around a year and if I’m honest I was beginning to wonder whether meeting people in a coffee shop for a chat had any real purpose.

The idea was to meet wherever the person chooses. Somewhere comfortable and familiar, so that coaching can take place as a real-world experience and become a way of working alongside people. In the first weeks the conversations would often be about the weather or trending Netflix shows. This did not feel work-related and at times I’d wonder if I was getting coaching right. But then there’d be infrequent glimmers, when something real and honest about a person would emerge.

I have known Jon for around three years. If his risk assessment were to land on your desk it would identify Jon as ‘high risk to staff and himself’. He is described in

professionals’ meetings as ‘complex’ and ‘a nuisance’ and as ‘an adult with capacity and no social care needs’. He ‘chooses’ to act in ‘self-destructive ways’ and ‘refuses to work with services’.

Thankfully, my task as a PTS Coach was to become familiar with Jon as a person, not with his risk assessment (which in any case bore no relation to his behaviour with me). The first year or so of meetings with Jon hardly scratched the surface and I learned quickly that he did not want to answer questions. And when he felt he was being questioned or judged, he would leave. Coaching is organic and allows for someone to come and go as they please. But he would always call the next week or the next month and ask me to meet him.

Eventually I found the confidence to stay restful and patient in the silence. One day I didn’t fall into a prescriptive spiel about Jon’s situation or say something professional to kill the awkward stillness

between sips of steaming tea. In that moment we both sat equally awkward and equally human. Jon snatched that moment of balanced power and a wave of feelings, thoughts, and emotions all spilled out. I just listened.

The most important lesson coaching has taught me is that listening empowers. Listening builds trust. My job is to listen and to empower people, and fulfilling this would not be possible if I too wasn't listened to. I am fortunate to work in an environment where listening is valued and enthusiastically put in place. An authentic voice is heard beyond coaching sessions.

At The Brick, we are working towards offering meaningful and valuable provision for people who are going through tough times. We are listening to people to be able to respond with action and create the changes, opportunities and support people tell us they want and need.

When people are truly heard, it becomes obvious that in so many instances the barriers that prevent someone from moving forward are systemic. The very services that are intended to help people who have struggles can be part of the problem. It is now being widely accepted that a 'fixing people' approach is at best demoralising and at worst dehumanising. If we want to move forward with a method of service delivery that allows people to

be in control of their choices and have autonomy over the changes they want to make, then listening is key. By listening to people as individuals with their own unique experiences of tough times and services, we can identify the systemic barriers and remove these by relinquishing the power the systems hold over people.

I listen to individuals, as others in support and similar roles do, but for people to be truly heard it takes more than public-facing staff to listen. It takes more than a charity to listen from the bottom up within its own walls. So much learning for me has come from the opportunities to share with and listen to others through networking, partnership working and social media platforms. I have no doubt that a collective voice is growing, calling for system change. A collective voice can be loud, but an authentic voice, one person's whisper is equally as powerful.

**Samantha Abram has been working at The Brick in Wigan for 4 years as a PTS (Person-Led, Transitional, Strength-based) Coach, in partnership with the Mayday Trust. Before she was a coach, she was a Lecturer, teaching English in adult education, and currently she is studying for a Social Justice and Education MA at the University of Lancaster.**

# REFLECTING THE COMMUNITIES WE SERVE



## By Nasim Qureshi

We need to ensure staff, volunteers, trustees and advisers reflect the communities they serve, we've heard in our Listening to Each Other cell. And as Nasim Qureshi explains, organisations that operate in this way can achieve a great deal more.

From our beginnings a decade ago, Inspired Neighbourhoods has taken particular care to operate in a way that is fully a part of, not separate from, the Bradford communities in which we operate.

For example, we drew a set of circles with a two-mile radius from each of our centres, and then spent time identifying and learning about all the networks, local organisations and community associations within each circle.

A while ago, we alongside partners decided to establish a summer school service, in part to gain greater insights into how lives of children and young people have been changing in recent years. In the area selected for this service, we partnered with a large number of local community organisations, building on their strengths, and reaching people we were not otherwise in contact with. We also involved the police, schools and statutory bodies, and were able to influence the City-wide strategy, inviting

the Council Chief Executive and others into discussions with the young people, letting them speak for themselves.

Each of our centres has a community advisory board or committee, and these feed in to our main Board. So community voice travels continually up and down, and this produces a level of intelligence that could not be obtained from any number of surveys. There is no need to spend money on marketing and promotion to the community, because the connections are already in place.

Before any project is started, there is a period of co-design with the local communities. This type of activity can rarely be covered by grant funding, because most funders expect to see a full plan set out in advance when we submit a grant application. Yet, if we want to do things *with* people, rather than *to* them, that initial co-design phase is so important. For this reason, we try to generate as much income

as possible through our own trading efforts, and this independent income allows us to operate in ways which are very flexible and responsive to the things that matter most to the people we work with.

The process is not just about co-design, it is also about co-delivery. A wide range of people from within the various communities become volunteers, and volunteering is a foundation for substantial areas of our work. For example, the library service is entirely run by community volunteers. We take this very seriously, and our volunteers have written roles and responsibilities, and training opportunities. Because of this, volunteering has high status in our organisation, and can often become a route into paid work. In fact, most of our paid employees started off that way.

I have a simple principle: 'If we are sitting in a room, we are not working with the communities.' So I make sure we all spend most of our time out and about – 95 per cent of our workforce is peripatetic.

I don't like time sheets and we don't use them. Instead, our employees work the flexible hours that are needed to deliver services, often outside standard hours, responding to emergencies, while balancing their own childcare or other family needs. Nearly everyone works more than their 37 contracted hours, and turnover is very low.

There are now 75 employees and 32 volunteers. Many have lived experience of

the difficulties the organisation is seeking to address. We are a disability-friendly organisation, and a lot of attention is paid to mental well-being within the team. The Board composition too is over 90 per cent local.

And so, at every level, our teams have emerged from the local communities and remain part of them. Our organisation is able to listen and respond because of the people in our teams, the ways they work, and the informal conversations that happen all the time.

Over the last decade, operating in this way, Inspired Neighbourhoods has gone from strength to strength. We now provide a broad mix of services across four different communities within or close to Bradford. This includes, for example, mental health and physical health support, domiciliary care, employment advice, enterprise advice, community housing, a country park, and the community library, improving the lives of over 10,000 local residents, and supporting over 800 businesses. We've learned that, if we keep our feet on the ground, and build a workforce that remains rooted in and reflective of our communities, we don't lose touch, and can achieve a great deal.

**Nasim Qureshi is CEO of the Inspired Neighbourhoods group, a social business and a community anchor across the Bradford district.**



# HOW TO BRING ABOUT PEOPLE-POWERED PLACES



**By Rich Wilson**

A key lesson from our Listening to Each Other cell is that we must let people shape the agenda, through informal everyday listening activities as well as in more formal exercises like citizens assemblies. How to do this is explored here by Rich Wilson.

If the pandemic taught us one thing it's that our everyday actions matter. Whether it's the pandemic, climate or cost of living crisis we, the people, play an absolutely critical role in the effectiveness of the response.

The importance of people power for communities and local government is particularly acute. We know local authorities barely have sufficient resources to cover the basics of social care, waste management and highways. Given the spiralling cost of social care, an ageing population and growing inflation, we should assume the situation will get worse before it gets better.

The problem is that transactional public services and top-down local politics systematically deactivate people, eroding what the academics call self-efficacy and collective-efficacy.

But you knew that already. What is new is the opportunity to do something about it.

In the last few years we've seen a rapid growth in citizens' assemblies and Good Help public services. They are however rarely seen as interdependent aspects of local people power systems, but they are, and when recognised as such hold a key to unlocking the civic energy we desperately need. Here's how.

## Getting local citizens' assemblies right

In the last few years we've seen over 39 citizens' assemblies in the UK. These are fora where citizens are selected at random and are demographically representative of the local population. They are usually 40-100 people in size and deliberate on an issue like climate change or public spending, making recommendations to local decision-makers. They are very effective at generating good policy (i.e. that practically works and will address the issue), overcoming polarisation and activating participants to address the issue in question.

The problem is the number of people participating is too small for the recommendations to get real political traction and the number of assemblies are too few given the need to activate as many citizens as possible. The ‘tipping point’ for initiating cultural change is around 25 per cent of the population. So for a local authority size of around 100,000 we need around 25,000 people to start seeing themselves as active citizens and being invited to be part of governing the place.

For citizens’ assemblies to achieve their promise of becoming the beating heart of people powered places the following four changes need to happen:

**1. Make them inclusive, so anyone can participate**

The Global Citizens’ Assembly for COP26 was governed by two principles: that anyone on earth could be selected for the core assembly and anyone on earth could run their own Community Assembly. We provided a toolkit that enabled anyone anywhere to have the same resources as the core assembly members, run a high quality local workshop and upload the citizens’ proposals into the core system. We could invite every community group, school child, business or religious society into the citizens’ assembly, transforming the quality of the data available and the number of people participating.

**1. Make them places for civic imagination**  
Citizens’ Assemblies work best when they support participants to engage

with the emotional reality of a situation (such as poverty or climate) and create the space to imagine new futures often outside what they thought was possible. This is especially critical now when we face unprecedented challenges that require transformative, not incremental responses. For example if your climate assembly is recommending more recycling or bus lanes you can be sure your process is insufficiently imaginative.

**3. Make them political chambers in their own right**

In a previous article, I explained how the French national climate Assembly was a powerful political chamber that sent shockwaves across the political system. Framing citizens’ assemblies as political chambers is not just important in terms of honouring civic voice, it’s also a true reflection of the significant power that citizens have, and the impossibility of even the most diligent politician to accurately represent them.

**4. Raise their profile**

The best citizens’ assemblies capture the imagination of the entire population. The Irish and French Assemblies both had awareness in the adult population well over 75 per cent; and their deliberations were followed closely by the populations. A high profile generates public debate about the recommendations, energising local civic life and meaning that any proposals will be carried by a wave of popular interest.

## Mainstreaming Good Help Public Services

The 2018 Good and Bad Help report described a national movement of people and places, committed to making public services engines of civic confidence and action. The Good Help project did not start life as public service reform initiative, though; rather it was the conclusion of a post-Brexit inquiry into why growing numbers of people felt ‘excluded’, ‘deactivated’ and ‘wanting to take back control’. It turns out that if you want to support people to take control of their lives, or as Jon Alexander’s recent book *Citizens* argues, for people to be active citizens not passive consumers, public services can be key drivers for achieving this.

I became interested in this area having founded and run *Involve*, the democracy charity, and was struck by how initiatives such as citizens’ assemblies were insufficient to address the ‘deactivation’ crisis; and indeed were in danger of exacerbating power inequalities, if the only people who participated were already activated.

The pandemic has seen a rapid growth of Good Help organisations as public service commissioners have started to wake up to their potential. *Clean Slate*, the employment support organisation, grew rapidly going from 15 to 53 staff in two years. They now record annual financial gains of £1.8 million for over 2,000 people,

nearly six times as many as before the pandemic. Organisations like *Grapevine*, *Long Table* and *Community Catalysts* can all tell a similar story. What has not yet happened, however, is for people to realise that if citizens’ assemblies are the beating heart of people-powered places, then Good Help public services are the life blood, supplying the activated citizens to both rise to the challenges we face, and make the brave decisions we need.

This is not an argument for replacing politicians with citizens. It is, though, a practical plan for ensuring that people take their rightful place at the local governance table.

**Rich is co-founder of the People Power Lab and Global Citizens’ Assembly for COP26. In 2004 Rich founded the charity *Involve*, which under his leadership became a leading centre for public participation research, innovation and policy-making. He has been an adviser for the OECD, UNFCCC, WHO, UNDP, EU and many national and local governments. He has written over 100 policy reports, been a regular contributor to the *Guardian*, wrote the *Anti Hero* book, is a trustee of the Local Trust, a Clore Social Fellow and was deputy chair of *ScienceWise*.**

# MAKING SPACE IN RESEARCH AND POLICY FOR PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE



**By Lucy Holmes**

Bringing more people with lived experience into research and policy-making helps us listen, we've concluded in our Listening to Each Other cell. Lucy Holmes shares her experience of this in the homelessness sector.

The first time I accompanied a volunteer peer researcher to an interview, for a project I led at St Mungo's, I learned more about myself than anything else. As I sat in the corner of the room, biting my tongue and sitting on my hands, I reflected on how significant and challenging it is to make space for others to do the listening.

It was hard to watch someone conduct an interview in a way I thought wasn't perfect, wasn't the way I'd been trained to do it, wasn't *quite* the way I had trained her to do it, wasn't the way *I would have done it myself*.

The case for including citizens, patients and service users in designing the systems that govern our lives is well made. From organisations like Involve calling for citizen involvement in civil society to the NHS ambition to embed patient and the public involvement in all of its work, great strides have been made.

Yet properly involving people without professional training in areas of work that have historically been done by 'qualified' experts (like researchers with academic training or policy professionals with detailed technical knowledge) can be difficult and scary.

The charity I now work in, Groundswell, was created – and named – to give power and voice to people experiencing homelessness. To empower a groundswell of feeling, of opinion, of expertise, and to speak out! To speak truth to power. To disrupt and challenge and inspire.

In our earliest days, our Speakout events were a chance for 'people to communicate with and influence people and organisations who make decisions that affect their lives.' In September 2000 more than 2,000 homeless people and 250 support organisations took part in Speakouts.

Since then, Groundswell has grown (we now have staff and volunteers nationwide) but our ethos remains the same. We exist to enable people who have experience of homelessness to create solutions and move themselves out of homelessness – to the benefit of our whole society. Lived experience is central to everything we do, from our Listen Up! peer journalism hub to our national #HealthNow research, partnership and policy programme.

Around two-thirds of our staff team have personal experience of homelessness and around one-third started as volunteers before moving into paid roles. Some team members undergo intensive training. Our Homeless Health Peer Advocates receive several weeks of preparation to support their homeless clients to access healthcare services. We also train volunteers with personal experience of homelessness in research methods. These peer researchers then take the lead on all aspects of a research project. At Groundswell all our research is undertaken by people who have experienced homelessness.

As I sat in on my first peer research interview, silently berating myself and my ego, I missed the most important thing happening in the room. Only when I read the transcript did I realise how much the peer researcher had achieved. The fact that she shared her own experiences, memories and observations helped to elicit data from the participant I never would have got. And that's what matters. When professionals cede power, when organisations give the floor to people with expertise based on experience, the results might be different, but they can be better.

At the March Pathway conference 'Pathways from Homelessness', attended by esteemed clinicians, voluntary sector colleagues and government officials, Debs presented findings from a peer research project, as respected and listened to as any other speaker. Debs also described her experience as a Groundswell peer researcher:

'To be honest it's one of the most amazing experiences I've ever had. Just getting involved, meeting the other volunteers was great fun. [...] My favourite bit was asking people the questions. We did a lot of hours in a day centre and the people there – because I know them, because a lot of them are my friends – they were more willing to answer the questions, because I am one of them. They know I've been through homelessness. [...] They were more willing not just to answer the questions, but to be honest, to trust us researchers. To not just say what they thought we wanted to hear, to give us the real truth.'

Of course I still face dilemmas and questions. I wonder whether, by bringing people in, we're forcing them to mould themselves to a system we should, instead, be challenging or dismantling. Another essay in this collection by Jill Baker captures this neatly: 'I often go back to that question – who am I serving here? The people I am actually here to serve or the authority that oversees the systems?' One of the goals of our Listen Up! project is to support people who've been homeless to hold decision-makers to account. We're explicitly trying to challenge the system, not incorporate our reporters into it.

I also worry that if we pigeonhole people as 'experts by experience' we fail to see their other skills and perspectives. Just because you've been homeless doesn't mean you can't also have *professional* qualifications, expertise and standing. I perceive that in other areas of work (like dementia or mental health research) the lines between types of expertise are blurry and I'd like that to be true in homelessness and complex needs policy areas.

And we have to work hard every day to do the best by our peers, making sure we support them to progress, to develop. Some we help to prepare for paid roles. Others need training or equipment or travel cards to enable them to volunteer. And everyone needs and deserves good management, prompt and efficient work processes, suitable recognition and to understand what happens as a result of their hard work.

If I could impress just one point on anyone who's frightened of bringing people with lived experience into research and policy

roles it is this: there are people who are eager to help you get it right. Yes, it can be scary. Yes, it takes time and patience. Yes, it needs careful consideration before you leap in. But it will change your relationships, your organisation, your power base – for the better. Ask for support. Learn from others' mistakes and missteps. We're all so excited to see you succeed.

**Lucy Holmes is Creating Change Director at Groundswell, a charity that works with people with experience of homelessness, offering opportunities to contribute to society and create solutions to homelessness. Groundswell's vision is of an equal and inclusive society, where the solutions to homelessness come from people with experience of homelessness. She previously worked at Alcohol Change UK, St Mungo's, Missing People and the University of Edinburgh.**

# LET'S THINK MORE LIKE SCIENTISTS, AND INCLUDE LIVED EXPERIENCE IN RESEARCH



**By Liz Richardson**

The involvement of people with lived experience in research and policymaking adds real value, we've concluded in our Listening to Each Other cell. Liz Richardson, a social scientist and academic, gives her thoughts on this here.

I would like to make a proposition: respect for people's experiential expertise could be strengthened if we thought more like scientists. When I talk to organisations about citizen participation, we often focus on thinking more like citizens. I would like to add that we should also focus on thinking more like scientists. I am a social scientist and academic, so perhaps I would say that! But there are some good reasons why this might be the case. I believe that thinking more like everyday scientists – or 'citizen scientists' – could mean better participation.

People are often instinctive scientists: they look for patterns and contrasts. They ask how context affects the effectiveness of a particular approach. They are concerned with definitions. These are all also excellent instincts for good policy-making. Many existing processes of policy and practice could be made more robust with a few tweaks towards an everyday science approach. After all, what distinguishes

research is that it is in a conversation with knowledge we already have, it tries to be systematic, and ideally comparative, we think carefully about biases in our data or sources, and we explain our definitions of terms.

So, imagine what this might mean for a participatory process. What might 'being in a conversation with existing knowledge' look like? In my academic work, this would be a literature review of academic papers. But, in other contexts, it might mean digging out the results of previous engagement exercises more thoroughly. Or talking to those affected about the history of a policy or place, and what the implications are of past legacies. Thinking carefully about bias in sources could lead to an effort to include more unheard voices. Being comparative means we try to take account of differences between groups or things (places, organisations, policies) in how they are treated.

One of the core principles underpinning these propositions is respect for different forms of expertise. Including lived experience or experiential expertise does not need to displace scientific, technical or bureaucratic expertise. Each issue needs to be assessed for what types of expertise are missing. Often this will be experiential expertise. But it may be that it is technical knowledge that is missing, or the input from people with a strategic vision.

Because each form of expertise is inherently partial, and limited, we need each other. Synergistic approaches are based on the idea that 'each has something the other needs'; we add, not substitute. Blending more lived experience and more science does not have to mean that our differences are somehow flattened out; respect for the unique value of each form of expertise remains. But it is also the case that these forms are often messy and integrated in reality anyway. Not all scientific expertise comes from professional scientists, for example; and citizens are not the only ones with lived experiences.

I have started to realise that my academic world is a lot more similar to non-academic worlds than it might initially appear. When people ask questions, they are potentially setting a research agenda. We need to think more like citizens yes, but there is untapped potential in thinking more like scientists.

**Liz Richardson is a Professor of Public Administration at the University of Manchester.**

**She does research on urban governance, public policy, citizen participation, and is interested in participatory research methods.**

**[Liz.richardson@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Liz.richardson@manchester.ac.uk)**



# JOINING FORCES



# WHY IS COLLABORATION LIKE A STREET PARTY?



By Cate Newnes-Smith

As our Joining Forces cell has been discussing, most social problems are too complex for any single organisation to solve on their own, and this means that collaboration is essential. Here, Cate Newnes-Smith, our thought leader for this cell, shares ideas on what good collaboration looks like.

I've come up with a theory around collaboration. I would be interested to hear your response: a) do you like this analogy? b) can it be built on in any way?

Collaboration is like holding a party.

At **Level Zero**, there are no parties. You don't bother to organise a party, you're just at home on your own or with your family. This is when no collaboration is going on. Sometimes this is what is needed, but not all the time.

You decide that you need to collaborate. You have decided to throw a party. You organise the party yourself. You decide everything – the date, the catering, the balloons, the decorations and then you invite your friends along. This is often the first step towards collaboration that people will take. You think that you are collaborating now, because people are invited to your event.

This is **Level One** of collaboration – other people are involved, but on your terms.

However, perhaps at the next party you throw, you ask friends for advice on the party. Do you think we should do a buffet or a chilli? Shall we start at 7.30pm or 8.30pm? Shall I invite Amelia and Seth from No 67? At full **Level Two**, you ask a group of friends to help you organise the whole thing. Let's agree a date we can all make. Who do you want to invite? Let's decide the menu together. You know that your parties are valuable when other people are keen to help you organise.

But then you start to realise that other people are having parties. And actually, maybe you could have more fun if you went along to other people's parties, you could meet more new people, you could have a wider variety of conversations. So, you start to reach out to like-minded people to make

friends, in the hope that you will get invited to their parties. Over time, you make good friends and offer to help them organise their parties. This is **Level Three** of party collaboration. This is an important step in the level of maturity in collaboration. It's not about your party, but other people's parties – you spend time learning about other people and other parties that are being organised out there. You start to figure out where you can go and where you can be. Being invited to lots of parties is a good sign, it shows that people value you and what you have to offer.

**Level Four** of party collaboration is the most sophisticated – true collaboration. This is a street party where the whole road is involved and come together to organise it (not the type where Jessica at No 6 does it all and no one turns up). You genuinely organise parties together in collaboration

with other people and organisations. You agree together that you want to organise a party. You explore together why you want to organise a party, who is it for and how you are going to go about it. This is true collaboration. It requires trust and knowledge of each other's priorities. However, I suspect that it doesn't require a vision (yet). True collaboration starts with exploration. The largest piece of collaboration/social movement that I have worked on started with just one meeting... but that's an essay for another day.

Does this resonate with you? Do you like this analogy? Or is it broken? If so, why? Would you like to organise a party with me?

**Cate Newnes-Smith is the CEO of Surrey Youth Focus.**

# DIVING RIGHT INTO THE COMMUNITY, TOGETHER



**By Clare Wightman**

We've learnt in our Joining Forces cell that it's important for organisations working together to build a common understanding of what good looks like by listening to people at the sharp end. Here Clare Wightman reflects on her experience in Coventry.

Grapevine works on shifting power across services and systems, supporting people and communities to shape their lives and futures.

People like Lynne who, angered when her dog was injured by broken glass, ignited the Lift Me Up campaign to tackle fly tipping. Lynne is now in talks with managers of city rivers, bridges and parks about changes local families want to see.

People like Sam (not his real name) who in 2018 had what he describes as 'a complete mental breakdown' – the result of life incidents including childhood abuse, chronic illness, homelessness, and being involved in a tragic road accident. Sam is now the lynchpin of Healthy Communities Together, which sees local people and groups joining forces with local services and the acute end of the NHS to bring about transformational change.

Healthy Communities Together started out as a funding and support opportunity from The King's Fund and the National Lottery Community Fund to shift health inequalities by building new partnerships between the public and voluntary sectors.

Grapevine, Coventry City Council Public Health Department and Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Partnership Trust came together to consider this opportunity, and our combined take was we didn't want to just re-arrange the existing voluntary sector partnership deck chairs that reflect old grant-making and commissioning decisions, most, if not all of which, let's be honest, are quite invested in things not changing very much. I mean that as observation not criticism. It is understandable in the face of uncertainty and all of us do it some time or another.

Through Healthy Communities Together we wanted to refocus everyone's attention on person, place, and first-hand experience. We wanted to re-orientate the 'service system' towards the grain of people's lives and communities, their ambitions, and strengths. We also wanted to refocus attention on the reality that we are all the 'system' that keeps people well and thriving (or not): the person, family, neighbours, friends, community, businesses, local services, acute services.

So last year for nine months we took a vertical slice of the whole thing by focusing on the story of the system as told by Sam, someone actually experiencing it. And we did so as equals, prepared to come together to make change.

We are seeking to benefit the most marginalised and excluded Coventry people with mental health issues. Because of the system's failings, there are 10,000 of these people who experience jagged inequalities in income, employment, education and life expectancy. Covid-19 has sharpened these inequalities, particularly for the 1,248 people referred to statutory mental health services in Coventry's more deprived neighbourhoods. For example, 'Sam' lives in a neighbourhood where life expectancy is ten years below the national average.

Sam's story typifies the inequalities, outcomes and disempowerment we are seeking to improve. His *service journey* typifies common experiences and system challenges we want to change. And we always remember that behind 'Sam' stand 9,999 others. Their needs, strengths, priorities and experience will lead each conversation. And round another 8,000 are only a few steps away from the same trajectory if nothing changes.

So what did we discover? In dealing with his experiences Sam has coped alone, but he's also sometimes got support from local groups as well as support from statutory services. While he speaks positively of the people he has met, he also talks about the gaps between services and the impact of their failure to connect with each other. He also talks eloquently about the simple community acts that helped him get well: the daily chat with the postman, the daily cup of tea with a friendly face at the community centre.

In order to stay well Sam says he needs more two-way companionship, flexible services and practical help. This means people nearby who value him, to be able to give back, counselling services that don't put him to the back of the queue when he needs to change appointment times, help to get to the shops (he has difficulties carrying heavy loads) and someone to help look after his dog when he is struggling.

Here's what we have done so far.

Before diving in we spent some time 'poolside' working on our own relationships and our understanding of each other – what's on our plates professionally and personally? Why do we do what we do? How will we hold ourselves and each other to account? How will we behave when we disagree or when other priorities creep in? What's our felt purpose not just our stated one? Are we having side conversations when we shouldn't? We need a deep well of good will and mutual understanding to draw on because this work is tough going. Of course this isn't something we did or do just once. We are always returning to this place.

We then dived in and immersed ourselves in Sam's neighbourhood. We've been useful – fixing curtain poles and TV aerials, helping out at the charity shop, going to the Social Club and calling the raffles – in other words we've woven ourselves into the grain of neighbourhood life for a while.

And then we organised three humanising encounters or three big conversations in a local church, for the first time bringing together the Head of IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies), the Head of Acute Mental Health Services, the Head of Transformation and Partnerships, the clinical lead psychologist, public health consultants, the council's community resilience team, the GP, and just as many people and groups from the community. At the centre of it stood Sam and the story he wanted to tell.

We tried hard to make it a humanising, equalising encounter. This meant getting everyone to drop their professional masks, and share our own tough times and what has kept us strong. Pretty soon Steve, the Head of IAPT, and the Men's Shed leader bonded over a King Crimson T-shirt and we discovered that Steve had been in a punk band. You know something authentic and real is going to happen once you are out of the land of governance and deliverables into the land of trust, promise, bonds, keeping your word, being yourself, even, dare I say, it love.

Our second Big Conversation was partly about making sense of what we'd heard – using the 'systems thinking iceberg' to expose the layers at which change needs to happen. If we are really going to shift what

happens at the observable surface level then we have to shift the mindsets at the base of the iceberg too. The result was an ambitious vision for a better story.

Our third concerns the plan itself and that's where we are now.

Next up is to do this again and again across six more neighbourhoods in Coventry, iterating and learning as we go.

We're ambitious fish swimming in a big ocean of change – the abolition of Clinical Commissioning Groups, new NHS plans, the emergence of Integrated Care Systems and a pandemic. We know impact and influence won't come easily. We're optimistic people but if all we did was grow more horizontal power in the form of local Healthy Communities Together partnerships which can hold those in positions of authority and leadership to account, and at the same time bring a little more understanding and humanity into the system, we will have achieved no small thing.

**Clare Wightman is CEO of Grapevine Coventry and Warwickshire, which works with individuals and communities using a strengths-based approach to help them bring about change that will improve their lives and futures. They strongly believe that relationships solve problems and open up opportunities – for people, for organisations and for systems. You can contact Clare on Twitter @grapevineceo**

# JOINING FORCES, INCLUDING WITH RIVALS, AROUND A COMMON CAUSE



**By Nick Gardham**

One insight from our Joining Forces cell is that, in order to find common cause, you must surface and resolve any conflicts or power imbalances. Nick Gardham here shares his experiences of doing this in the world of community organising.

In 2011, David Cameron set out his blueprint for a Big Society. At the heart of this was Cameron's ambition 'to transfer power from the state to individuals, neighbourhoods or the lowest possible tier of Government, in that priority'. Perhaps what is most interesting for those involved in community organising was his statement that what remains of state power should be used for 'galvanising, catalysing, prompting, encouraging and agitating for community engagement and social renewal'.

To achieve this vision Cameron called for a 'new generation of community organisers', and in 2011 the Coalition Government delivered on this promise by awarding Locality a contract to train 500 community organisers across England. This ambitious project, operating at significant scale, was both welcomed and treated with disdain, in equal measure. Whether it was intentional in its timing or not, it couldn't help but be interwoven with cuts to the public sector, austerity and a desire for communities to step up and do more as public services retreated.

The Government investment in community organising in 2011 shone a spotlight on practice that had already been developing in England and across the UK by organisations such as Citizens UK in London, Church Action on Poverty in Teeside and Manchester, and Together Creating Communities in Wales, as well as Nurture Development's promotion of Asset-Based Community Development which bridged the gap between community organising and community development.

All this created a flurry of activity from organisations and funders seeking to understand what community organising was, and how it applied to their existing practice. It paved the way for new community organising initiatives, such as ACORN UK, and for many individuals and organisations to explore how community organising could help them meet their goals, including trades unions, political parties, charities and protest groups. Inevitably this led to both growth and competition.

As new models and approaches developed, a few funders began to invest in organising, whilst think tanks such as the Young Foundation started to look at the ‘market’ for community organising and the potential for scaling up. The language of creating a market and competition over funding was perhaps a contributing factor to the divisions which quickly developed between organisations and practitioners of various types of community development, community organising, Asset Based Community Development, and also the many protest groups that use organising methods to build their power and effectiveness.

Causes of competition can also be the debates over ‘purity’ and what ‘real’ community organising is or isn’t, questions as to whether it is right to take Government investment, and the need of each organisation to build a brand and identity in order to recruit members and practitioners and to attract funding.

Not many would disagree that the growth of new practitioners of citizen-centred and grassroots community work was anything other than positive. However, the divisions that have emerged could be considered damaging to the people we aim to serve. The organisation I work for, Community Organisers, is no less culpable than any other community organising movement or organisation out there.

However, over the last two years nationally and internationally we have felt the impacts of global crises that are putting unprecedented pressure on those who are already on the margins. As organisers working alongside people to build their

collective power to bring about change, we need to challenge ourselves to look at how we can start to create the longer term systemic changes that counter the deep structural inequalities that people are facing, rather than only mitigating the immediate impacts.

It is in these times of crises that we need to break free from the traditional shackles of organising that leads to siloed approaches in separate organisations and issue-based areas and look to build the bigger we.

To exemplify this, in March 2020, Community Organisers called for the largest free-to-use wireless network for low-income communities. As the country was placed into lockdown, conversations across our community organiser network highlighted that many people would be locked out of society due to the unaffordability of internet access. Across our network local people and organisations started to develop organising approaches that were short term and immediate, taking the necessary action to ensure that local people could gain access to the internet. To support this, Community Organisers worked with grassroots organisers to build a wider national alliance of organisations to create a new power structure built on relationships and a commitment to a common cause that could advocate for a longer term strategic approach.

This strategy to organise simultaneously, locally and nationally, meant that powerful stories of action from the ground could complement the calls from a powerful nationwide alliance for a bigger change. The campaign led to the formation of the UK’s first ever national databank by O2.



As we shift from the crisis of a global pandemic to the impacts of inflation and unprecedented economic pressures on those with the lowest incomes, again we need to continue to organise in communities in the short term to mitigate the impacts, but also, at the same time, build national alliances of organisations committed to working with a common purpose to tackle the root causes of injustice. To explore how collectively an alliance of organisations can address the cost of living crisis, Community Organisers is convening the Cost of Living Alliance alongside 35 other organisations to create a common purpose.

It is, I believe, in this understanding of organising that we can start to rethink civil society. A civil society that is built on the principles of solidarity and local control with a commitment to join forces with others to work for longer-term systemic change.

**Nick Gardham is the CEO of Community Organisers. Over the last 13 years Nick has worked across the UK and internationally, training and supporting thousands of people in the practice and principles of community organising.**



# PUTTING COMMUNITIES IN THE LEAD ON HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE



**By Samira Ben Omar**

In our Joining Forces cell, a key insight is that we should stop trying to control from the centre. Instead we should be creating a culture in which people at every level have the power to be leaders for system change. Here Samira Ben Omar explains why this is so important in the field of health and social care.

Until recently I led on system change as well as partnerships and engagement for the North West London Integrated Care System. In this role I came to truly understand that communities and grassroots organisations were far more central to the task of producing better health and care outcomes than had been generally accepted. And also that we needed to fundamentally rethink our relationships, and do much more to create the conditions for those in the communities we serve to play a central part in bringing about sustainable transformation in addressing inequalities in health and care.

Here are some things that I learned:

- The public sector is always limited in what it can achieve alone. A lot of the time those of us in the public sector health and social care system assume that it is primarily our own efforts that will produce the big changes that are needed. The reality is that maybe 80 per cent or even 90 per cent of what impacts on health happens outside healthcare settings. The quality of housing, job security, the sense of community to name just a few examples.
- Local communities are more resourceful than we think. A lot of the solutions to the challenges that the system struggles with and that are needed to make a difference already exist – a huge amount is going on all the time. But we don't always see it because it is out there in the community, not easily visible to us when our policies and strategies are developed in our offices, while the day-to-day reality of access and experience and quality of care for our residents and communities – especially those most excluded – happens on the ground, on the estates and in neighbourhoods.

- There is often a disconnect between the mainstream policy narrative and the reality of community life. A prime example of this was in the early days of lockdown when everyone was told that if they needed to self-isolate they should avoid sharing a bedroom, bathroom or a kitchen, and that older people and those clinically extremely vulnerable should self-isolate. This type of narrative – while it applied to many – simply did not resonate with very large numbers of people, especially those living in overcrowded conditions, those in multi-generational and multi-occupancy households across the country.
- Communities do most when they can decide for themselves. Communities work best when people decide to take action together, when they exercise their own agency, and when they are motivated by a shared and clear purpose rather than prescribed targets defined by someone else. Some years ago, I set up a Community Champions scheme. As part of a lung cancer awareness initiative, the champions were asked to make contact with 600 people, and the fact that the campaign resonated with them meant that they reached 3,000. The target they had been set had no relevance for them, and when they decided to ignore it and follow their own motivations, they achieved a lot more.
- Community spaces are the lifeblood of local action. In the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire it was the local community, the churches, temples, synagogues and mosques for example, that stepped in to offer help, not only to

residents but also to every public sector organisation, so that they could deliver support to those directly affected by the fire. And we saw the same thing more recently in the pandemic where for example the local Gurdwara – among others – delivered over 500 food packages to NHS Health and Care staff, as well as thousands of meals to homeless people – on a daily basis.

So, what are the preconditions to create a culture in which people at every level – including in the community – are able to be drivers of the big system transformation needed to achieve better health outcomes, not least in this new world of ‘Integrated Care Systems’?

Firstly, we need to undo and unlearn some of our own embedded behaviours. In the public sector it seems we are conditioned to do ever more: organise, design and deliver more programmes. Yes, these things are often critical and very much needed, but they cannot be the starting point for achieving change and transformation. The nature of the relationship that we establish with our communities – and indeed our frontline staff – is the sustainable element and that relationship can only be built on the basis of honest, transparent and non-gendered conversations where the starting point is about the person and the conversation starts with ‘How are you?’

We need to acknowledge that as health and care organisations, we sometimes create and frame things in our own image and then we wonder why we find it difficult to engage with wider communities or why our lay membership is not representative of our communities.

The answer to this is simple: we set up committees in our image and we only attract people who are familiar with our ways of thinking and doing (a very substantial number of our lay representatives tend to be retired civil servants, teachers, health care professionals, NHS managers etc). I believe that to address this we need to separate the function of committees as formal routes to engagement – which are necessary for governance and assurance purposes – from the role of creating and nurturing a kind of collaborative space, where power-sharing is explicit, where no one person owns the agenda, and where those who participate, including local people, can bring forward proposals and make things happen – on their own terms.

We also need to become explicitly committed to talking about racism and discrimination and their impact on health and care outcomes. We didn't need the pandemic to tell us that racism exists in the NHS and other public sector institutions, but it was a stark national and global reminder – the pandemic highlighted the disproportionate impact on people in areas of high health inequality, as well as among people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. We cannot forget this, and we have a duty to keep this agenda at the forefront of every conversation on the impact of policies and strategies on our communities.

We have to commit to valuing the stories that people share with us as a valid and robust form of research equal to the quantitative data that we acquire. We also must commit to measuring what people value. People value trust and trusted relationships, and we don't have to go that far back to truly understand this. If we have learnt nothing else from the national COVID vaccine roll-out, we have absolutely learnt the power of trust and trusted relationships to deliver the outcomes required and improve vaccine uptake, especially among those most affected by COVID.

Finally, this essay represents only my humble reflections and I have to admit that I have been intentional in some of the provocations here and to that end I invite you to challenge me – I invite you to a different type of conversation.

**Samira Ben Omar has over 25 years' experience working in the public sector and the NHS. Her work has particularly focused on policy development, transformation, equality, participatory research and initiating grassroots community-led programmes and social movements for change. She is currently working as an independent consultant and sits on the King's Fund General Advisory Council.**

# MAKE FRONT LINE TEAMS THE DRIVERS OF SYSTEM CHANGE



**By John Mortimer**

Managers must stop trying to control from the centre, as those working at the front line are often best placed to bring about the changes that people need to improve their lives – this message has emerged clearly from our Joining Forces cell. John Mortimer gives his insights here.

Back in 2010, Great Yarmouth had a council housing waiting list of 6,000 and even the people who were re-housed were waiting up to 30 months to find a home. I was invited in to take a fresh look at this, and see if it was possible to come up with a better approach.

I worked with the housing team, and we decided to abandon the conventional choice-based lettings scheme, and all the standardised form-filling that went with that. Instead I encouraged the team to have conversations with people. The team soon discovered that council housing wasn't always what was really needed – many people needed help to access private rented accommodation or to resolve a dispute with their landlord, for example.

Once we started to reappraise the task from the perspective of the person involved, it became obvious that a standardised solution couldn't possibly work – after all, people are

individuals, and an individualised response was what was needed. The frontline staff started to think more creatively about solutions to people's needs, and in turn that required their managers to think differently as well. This meant moving away from command and control and allowing the team much greater flexibility. Which was scary at first, but the results soon started to look impressive. As reported in the national press, by 2015 the waiting list was cut to 309, and the number of appeals had fallen from 27 per month to one per year.

I've found that a similar approach is required to bring about positive improvements in many other service settings. And often the people who work at the front-line know very well what good looks like, and would like nothing better than to change the way they are expected to work, knowing that better outcomes will follow.

This is what I was told when working with a community health team recently: 'At the start of engaging with a resident, we make assessments. First, someone else makes an assessment on the phone. Then weeks later, by the time I get the referral, I need to make another assessment. Typically there are 89 pages of forms and assessments to complete.'

I worked with this team to help them carry out an exercise to map out the end-to-end flow of work that it took to deal with someone who needed some help. It was really, really long, with 95 steps. And out of that really long flow, only five steps were actually ones that provided the value to the resident.

The team decided to put those assessments aside, and create their own approach to working with a person. And that was the difficult bit – they had to go back to basics and start by focusing on the needs of the person. Yes, a bit like an assessment, but this time they decided to do something different, they listened. They talked to the people they visited about whether they had relatives, what made them happy, what mattered to them, and so on.

The team then spent some time gathering evidence of what they had done and the impact it had. They asked the question; what are the main causes of the issues that citizens face, that cause the problems that we help them with?

There was one particular theme that kept coming out, and that was the fact that so many people had just no ambition, no interests, no reason for looking forward in their life. All they saw was that their health was getting worse. The team's new way of working was to help them reconnect with a sense of purpose in their lives, and reconnect them with those things that made them get up in the morning. Once they did this, the medical and life issues began to find ways to be resolved.

As one team member said:

'I had just finished writing up the difference that we made to Len, one of the people that we had helped. The core role that I played in this was simply to help Len to get over the death of his wife, look forward to things he likes to do, and take charge of his life.

'As I wrote that up on the board, someone asked where in the health system can people go to get this help? Perhaps it does not exist? I suddenly realised that I knew how to do this; I was trained to do this when I was studying to become an Occupational Therapist. I stopped, and thought, after I joined the health service, I never did that anymore. I had forgotten about that ... What had become of the hopes I had to make a difference?

'While it was still fresh in my mind, I wrote this down:

How I work now	What I was trained to do
<p>This is what I do every day:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pick up allocated work.</li> <li>• Split my activities into timed slots.</li> <li>• Do assessments (one hour).</li> <li>• Delegate to others.</li> <li>• Fill out paperwork (three hours).</li> <li>• No breaks.</li> <li>• Do tasks from assessments.</li> </ul>	<p>Understand people's lives and their context. Take a holistic view. Promote independence. Take time to do things well.</p>
<p>This is the purpose of my job:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put in equipment.</li> </ul>	<p>Help people live a purposeful life.</p>
<p>This is what it does to people:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The person is seen as the problem.</li> <li>• They become an assessment/referral.</li> <li>• They become non-compliant.</li> </ul>	<p>I help someone turn their life around. They are on a journey.</p>
<p>This is what it does to me:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel not important, a cog in a machine.</li> <li>• Occasionally I feel I make a difference.</li> <li>• I am stressed at work and at home.</li> </ul>	<p>Best job in the world. Motivated. Happy. Empowered.</p>

The right hand side demonstrates the potential of letting go of the centralised constricting standard procedures, and allowing those at the service front-line to do the job they are trained and want to do. In this way they won't just be doing the right thing for an individual – they will also be playing a leading role in a broader system change.

**John Mortimer has been working with systems thinking and complexity methods, helping public services to redesign their service design around the citizen. He has been leading research on integrated working, and has numerous case studies published in books, articles and blogs.**

# TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE, WE NEED TO BRING BUSINESS ON BOARD



**By Tom Levitt**

**We must seek out powerful allies elsewhere, including in the business world to build the bigger we, we've learnt in our Joining Forces cell. Tom Levitt writes here about the opportunity to link up in new ways with businesses.**

I was speaking at a global conference on corporate volunteering in Australia, a few years ago. The audience was 500 community organisers and volunteer managers, from business and the social sector around the world. The speaker following me got the biggest cheer when she said 'We at [name of bank redacted] are scrapping team volunteering days!'

Why the ecstasy? Because too often such days, involving paintbrushes, litter pickers, tee-shirts bearing the corporate logo, exist to serve the needs of the company and not society. If you want to do team building – and only team building – go paint balling.

'Corporate Social Responsibility', without qualification or explanation, really has become meaningless. For too many people it means ticking boxes or opting in to temporary activities separate from the normal course of events. 'CSR' has come to mean 'Charitable Superficial Response'. Let's leave it behind, stuff it behind the fax machine and move on.

The focus I believe should be on 'purpose', a reason for being which goes beyond, or even comes in front of, making money for a company's owners. The very term company derives from the Latin meaning to 'break bread with' – a social not just economic purpose. Over a century ago the Lever brothers, W.H. Smith, Jessie Boot, and others founded companies which had a real social purpose.

And the good news is that more and more companies are rediscovering their social purpose, and taking action accordingly. From the pharmaceutical company that asks the children's charity to help it prioritise future product development, to the business that extends its paternalism from its own employees to those in its distant supply chain, because they're equally important in delivering its mission. From the SME that decides to pay the Real Living Wage and not just the legal minimum 'because that's who we are', to the corporate that deliberately buys products from a social enterprise, recognising that it's a sustainable way of doing good by proxy.



These are all relatively small decisions; but together they make a big difference. Part of their impact is to make the host companies both better places to work and even – the evidence shows – more profitable in the long term.

The company that tries, succeeds. ‘TRIES’ stands for ‘Transparent, Responsible, Inclusive, Ethical, Sustainable’:

- **Transparent:** light is a great disinfectant and a company that acts in a transparent fashion is inviting its stakeholders to trust it. ‘We have nothing to hide’ is a great claim, especially if it’s true.
- **Responsible:** taking responsibility for your company’s full impact on the world and not just the nice bits that suit you.
- **Inclusive:** every governance expert will tell you that diverse boards and diverse workforces work better than monolithic ones.
- **Ethical:** treat your employees like partners; invest in them, get them on board with your company purpose. Walk the talk on ethics.
- **Sustainable:** thinking and acting long term: you don’t want to be here today and gone tomorrow.

My preferred term is ‘Company Citizen’. A company is a legal form which includes corporates, SMEs, social enterprises and even charities. A company is also a social organisation. Being a citizen, after a moment’s thought, describes a balance of rights and responsibilities; exercising those freedoms allowed under the law, tempered by duties to others and a sense of self-discipline. A decent citizen thinks of the future, not just the present, and is motivated by factors other than, or in addition to, money.

‘Company Citizen’ tells you all you need to know about an organisation. It is an active, a doing role; it matures and progresses. It plans, maps out its future in a proactive way in order to achieve its mission. It has values and a sense of purpose.

The potential for businesses to make a difference is huge. The turnover of Oxfam is about £1 million a day. This is equivalent to a single large Tesco store. If just one per cent of the business sector’s revenue were to be applied to doing good that would dwarf what charities can achieve.

In recent years the funding provided to charities from private businesses has reduced. But in some cases this is because the businesses are taking on social projects themselves. For example, the Wates company is training prisoners so that on release they can take up jobs in the construction industry. This is good for the business too, helping to create a skilled and potentially loyal workforce.

The social sector has its own unique role. But in partnering with business, and acting as advocate, in raising the gaze of business from the short term to the long term, and in raising the moral and practical issues, it is possible to establish a win-win situation for business, the planet and society. And that I believe is the way to go.

**Tom Levitt is a former MP, and author of the ‘The Company Citizen: Good for Business, Planet, Nation and Community’. He is also an Advisory Board Member, Centre for Responsible Business at Birmingham University, and co-founder of Fair for You.**

WHAT KIND  
OF LEADERS  
SHOULD WE BE?



# A BETTER WAY OF 'LEADING' IN THE POST-COVID WORLD



**By Nick Sinclair**

Across all our discussions in the network, a new kind of leadership is emerging where:

- We become leaders not because we hold positions of power, but because we give power to others.
- We deploy the four Better Way behaviours to build connection and community beyond our organisations.
- We create the conditions for those at the sharp end to take more control.

But how can we counter the prevailing 'command and control' and managerial leadership model and make this newer style of leadership more widespread? Nick Sinclair, our thought leader for this line of inquiry, shares some ideas.

Throughout this pandemic we witnessed some powerful yet often quiet and unassuming examples of leadership emerging in our communities across the UK. Personally, this has offered me great hope and a reminder of the enormous power of people coming together to work with common purpose.

On the other hand, our classic leader identity seems to have taken a bit of a battering with many of our charismatic national 'leaders' displaying quite the opposite of what was hoped for.

During this time, we've also heard the growth of a narrative that leadership

is something to do with centrally commanding and controlling people and resources from the top. I find these behaviours and this narrative confusing and frustrating. Perhaps more worryingly though, I think it could be undermining the confidence of people to take up or embrace the leadership challenge where they are.

In contrast to 'charisma', 'command' and 'control', conversations in our Better Way Network have kept alive and proliferated a theory of leadership that is human, relational, adaptive, contextual and one that is focussed on achieving change through building power in others not by hoarding it ourselves. It is a theory that

recognises we all have the potential to be leaders of positive change (if we want to be), and it is the challenge of those who identify as leaders (of something) to help unlock that potential in others.

This feels especially relevant when thinking about the growing rhetoric we hear in society about our 'valuable' and 'vulnerable' people. I believe this to be unhelpfully divisive and something that needs to be tackled head on. Approaches like Local Area Coordination show what is possible when people come together to collaboratively design, cherish and protect the conditions required to turn this paradigm on its head and view people as leaders of their own lives and communities with gifts to share and contributions to make.

Creating the systemic conditions for things like Local Area Coordination to take root and flourish requires bravery and confidence on the part of those seeking to lead and catalyse such change. For these leaders this can feel especially hard (and lonely) at a time of crisis, particularly if they're feeling low on resources and energy themselves. This is why creating the space to share, learn and explore how this feels with peers is so fundamentally important.

Over the last two years I have been working with groups of 'social leaders' to create something called New Social Leaders (NSL). NSL is a broad leadership learning experience convened over a number of online sessions aimed at people who are

nominally in some sort of leadership role in the community or 'social sector'. Over a 100 people have so far 'graduated' so to speak and many have stayed connected through monthly gatherings.

One of the things I commonly hear from people joining is that they feel like an 'imposter' for some reason and that feeling is undermining their sense of agency to bring about change in their world. When we dig a little deeper what we tend to find underpinning this is an ingrained perception that leadership is something to do with this 'command and control' model with the charismatic person at the top controlling things, as I mentioned earlier. NSL groups explore this together by thinking about the values of 'leaders' who inspire them as a starting point. This helps to think of leadership more in terms of influencing, stewarding and creating the conditions for positive change through the application of those values. Interestingly what is often concluded by the groups is that we can all be leaders of something (just as much as we are all followers in different ways too).

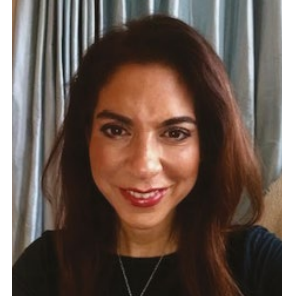
I wonder what would happen if we focussed our 'leadership' efforts less on commanding and controlling things (that are probably out of control anyway) and more on fostering a culture of curiosity that unearths everyone's gifts and potential? What would such a world look like and how might we get there? So far in the Better Way we think this can be achieved in some part through leaders who are:

- Giving power to others and helping them build it.
- Building connection and community beyond the limited sphere of their own work.
- Creating the conditions for those at the 'sharp end' to take more control, building relationships with those they serve.

One thing for sure is that we can move forward in these difficult times if we keep talking, sharing, building each other up and working through our challenges together. The Better Way Network remains one of the most impressive examples of this I have been involved with and I urge those who believe there must be a better way to join the movement!

**Nick Sinclair works for Community Catalysts as the Director of the Local Area Coordination Network. He supports councils (and their partners) in establishing the approach and convenes a network of those who have already done so. He recently established a leadership learning experience called 'New Social Leaders'. Before joining Community Catalysts Nick worked for organisations supporting people facing homelessness. He is the founding chair of a small community food event charity in Tyneside led by people who are refugees and people seeking asylum.**

# MORE TRACY DASZKIEWICZS AND FEWER JAMES BONDS AS FUTURE LEADERS



By Nadine Smith

The new model of leadership set out in Nick Sinclair's essay requires new role models, as Nadine Smith explores here.

It is not often I get the chance to really indulge myself in TV but recently I was delighted to finally watch the most recent James Bond and the very gripping Netflix series, *The Salisbury Poisonings*. I have thought a great deal about what both said to me about the kind of leadership we need to maintain our resilience, strength and trust over a difficult and testing time ahead for all in public service.

While the public flock to see heroes like James Bond, busting through buildings and windows to save the world, leaving a trail of destruction behind them, I don't think that's what we need right now in public life. Rather, I think we need more people like Tracy Daszkiewicz, the then director of public health in Salisbury who was faced with an unprecedented public health crisis in her community but sought no fanfare in the way she protected the public. She had to rely on her relational skills to bring the community with her. At one point she simply said to an angry resident, 'Make me a cup of tea and I will tell you all I know.'

It is Tracy who shows being a public service leader in complex times means being a servant of the public in any circumstance. She makes top-down decisions quickly (because she needs to) but soon accepts what she does not know and admits that bravely and in public. It is central government in this scenario that sees indecision as weakness and swoops in, commanding and seeking to control, but Tracy continues to lean on her core purpose, drawing strength from her family and those impacted. She emerges an unlikely and reluctant hero after much self-doubt and personal sacrifice. There are many like Tracy who we do not notice across our services working like this every day and, more than ever, we need to enable them.

Tracy's leadership style however seems to still clash with today's performance management, measurement and commissioning methods, which in many ways seek false comfort in the unknown by trying to set down expectations on people, not with people, about what good should look like.

I hope that as we enter yet another difficult period where trust is shaken (and possibly stirred), we will see an emergence and celebration of more ‘servant leaders’ like Tracy. Servant leaders know their places, people and systems, they are curious, they seek out blind spots, not fame. They might need those they serve to create the psychological safety to enable their ideas to be heard and to be allowed to fail, as every ‘hero’ does. We will need to therefore help them to create spaces for listening and convening and bust not out of windows, but out of our echo chambers. We need to be asking who is *not* here and what assumptions am I making by excluding them?

Such self-awareness of one’s limitations has been a feature of the Appreciative Inquiry approaches that helped Plymouth to really get to know their community and serve their needs better with a whole system approach that is the Plymouth Alliance. Radical listening (as described in Karin Woodley’s essay) is also becoming a more familiar practice that serves leaders well, shows humility, builds relationships and empathy, as well as informs your strategy.

As leaders, we must try not to become obsessed with perfection but think about how we are learning and adapting to the ever-changing circumstances of people and places. You could even make learning your strategy, and central government your learning partner, as was done in Finland to reform education and as is being explored for health in Scotland.

An encouraging example I see of new ways of leading emerging in England is Changing Futures, a £64 million project (£46 million from the government’s Shared Outcomes Fund with almost £18 million in aligned funding from The National Lottery Community Fund) where areas are rethinking how they support those experiencing multiple disadvantage to live better lives. They are testing and learning new approaches and driving systems change. Those with lived experience are at the heart of decision-making that impacts on them. Approaches across local systems, governance and decision-making are trauma-informed throughout, understanding what happens when services are able to learn together and take a whole person, system-wide approach.

So, my suggestion is this. In your next performance interview, talk about what you have done to enable servant leaders like Tracy to emerge – let’s change the conversation about what successful leadership looks and feels like, let’s hear what communities think your leadership should look and feel like too. Perhaps then more Tracy’s, not James Bonds, will emerge – without the need for a crisis.

**Nadine Smith is Director of Government and Enterprise at Social Finance and prior to that founded Nadine Smith Consulting.**

# LEADERSHIP AND THE PANDEMIC



**By Stephan Liebrecht**

**How can we counter the prevailing ‘command and control’ and managerial leadership model and make a newer style of leadership more widespread? This is the key leadership question we are exploring. Stephan Liebrecht reflects on how the pandemic has tested existing models of leadership.**

The last two years have been challenging for everyone who was involved in developing and delivering services in social care. There is no doubt in my mind that the Covid-19 pandemic has been and still is the single biggest challenge for the social welfare system since the Second World War. It remains uncharted territory, not only for me but for everyone around me too.

As an operational director in an adult social care service, I found myself confronted with these challenges from various angles. Here are just a few examples:

- Keeping local vulnerable people as safe as possible while the coronavirus is hitting these people the hardest.
- Enabling remote working for people who came into their jobs because they prefer to work with other people, offering compassion, dedication and building relationships.

- Enabling safe ‘face-to-face’ working in the community, supporting the most vulnerable people in often challenging circumstances where remote working is not an option.
- Keeping workers motivated, focused and resilient when they are unable to meet each other and their managers in person on a regular basis.
- Providing information and advice to the service about the spread of the virus and the benefits of using PPE and getting vaccinated whilst trying to follow national and local guidance that is often changing on a weekly basis.

Even after many years of being responsible for the delivery of social care services, the pandemic presented me with many new challenges, and I had to think again about my role as a leader.



So here are my reflections on what I found helpful over the last two and a half years. None of them are really new, but the pandemic gave them a different dimension and some of them a new lease in my working life.

**First, the vision.** It is important to have a good idea about how you think the services you are responsible for should be delivered. It's better if you can tell a compelling story about how and why you think this is the right way forward while keeping an open mind about the input others might bring to the party. During the last two and a half years I had to find a way to lead a service, write new chapters of our story and respond to the pandemic while working from the confinement of my own home for most of the time. It matters, and it makes a difference for those you are working with, when you can describe your ideas and plans for a better service. This doesn't stop being relevant, just because you find yourself in a crisis.

**Minimise micro-managing.** My own reflection of being at the receiving end of leadership is, that I find it most unhelpful when my decisions are constantly second-guessed and challenged or when (my) leaders are getting involved in the details of what I am trying to deliver. I experience this behaviour as disempowering. I thrive when leaders are investing trust and when they encourage me to explore ways to improve. On the other side I welcome constructive criticism and feedback. Working during the pandemic can feel removed from the services, and the instinct might be to increase control and to 'get a grip'. I found

that it is important to continue to invest trust in the people you work with and not fall back on to micro-managing to manage my own anxieties.

Over the years in management and leadership roles, I have experienced that people are most likely to work with me constructively and create better outcomes when they are included in decision-making and when I am fully transparent about the background of those decisions. I therefore very much like the idea that a leader is a 'primus inter pares' (Latin for first among equals). I am surrounded by experts in their jobs. As a leader I don't need to know it all or to call all the shots. I facilitate the journey, prepare the playing field and organise the resources.

**Adapting to online working.** Working remotely is not the same as sharing a room with the people you work and communicate with. Nothing can replace the experience of 'in-person' interaction. However, the virtual world created opportunities. Adding the chat dimension to a meeting that happens online for example makes the conversation richer and allows better participation. I was surprised how well even virtual job interviews worked. Virtual working reduces travel time and the carbon footprint too. I don't think I would want to fully return to the old meeting culture and I now advocate for a combination of virtual and in-person meetings.

**Communication is everything.** Not spending too much time in the same room with your colleagues and partners makes a difference when it comes to

communication. I tried to be personable even in remote settings, and I give time and space to other people for it too. I take my time to talk to people in all parts of the service.

**Being authentic, being me.** It's not easy to be myself in a leadership role. There are so many concepts of leadership, so many ways to define it, so many leadership courses are trying to give you the tools and techniques to be a great leader. I really don't want to dismiss them. The last months have reminded me that it is important for me and the people I work with that I don't lose myself in trying to be the image of a perfect leader. As a mature leader I learned that it is much better to be me, with all my flaws and qualities.

Stephan Liebrecht is a qualified social worker, social pedagogue, IT system engineer and music therapist. He qualified in Hamburg (Germany) in 1992 and has since worked in many settings. He moved to the London to work for an East London Local Authority in 2004 and joined Southend City Council as the Director of Operations in Adult Social Care in January 2022. He is a passionate social worker, musician and more recently also a grandfather.



# WHAT I'VE LEARNT ABOUT LEADERSHIP FROM A BETTER WAY



**By Laura Seebohm**

**Laura Seebohm gives her reflections here on what she learnt about leadership – and the new model of leadership we set out in Building a Bigger We – as the Better Way's Convenor for the North during 2021.**

A Better Way is a collection of leaders committed to changing the way things work for people across society. The network gives us a rare opportunity to hear perspectives from a diverse range of leaders including grassroots activists, community businesses, people from public sector, private sector, politicians ... the list could go on. We come together as individuals rather than representing organisations and, as one member has said, try to 'get under the skin of so many of the more difficult issues with a group of amazing diverse and talented people.' This diversity gives the network strength and points to a new style of leadership which stands outside any hierarchy: the power we all have to make a difference and to give power to others.

It's not just who's in the network but where they come from that matters. During my working life it has generally been the norm for me to be the only person in a room who lives and works in the North – so many networks, conferences, think tanks were not only in London, but often had London services, practice, policy as the point of reference. It's such a loss, but the Better Way network has been trying to change this.

Zoom has been a game-changer. Ability to access these forums, though, is only part of the challenge of inclusivity. Relationships (as in everything) are key so, when the Power to Change gave funding to a Better Way that enabled me to spend time reaching out and building relationships across the North and Midlands, it has been instrumental in widening and deepening the Better Way Network, bringing in far more people from across England and also – importantly – more community businesses, which have a special knowledge of how to build connection and community beyond their organisations from which we can all learn.

We are all on a learning journey in the network. During my time as convenor for the North and Midlands over the past year, I have reflected on my years entrenched in first the public and then the voluntary sector, and how that has, to some extent, blinkered my vision. It was when I started convening meetings specifically focused on those of us living and working in the North and Midlands that my thinking about what is important in a place, what we mean by community, where leadership is found and, most importantly, who is included and who is marginalised has really evolved.

This is in part because of the rich conversations I have had with a range of community businesses which have been so inspiring, especially their immediate relevance and contribution when the pandemic hit – like Centre4 in Grimsby creating an app to join up local businesses and people in need during lockdown; like Heeley City Farm in Sheffield making sure people knew where their green spaces were and providing fresh food to children from wherever they came. As my Better Way colleague Steve says, ‘they are connectors, they empower, they are inclusive. They can be fast, generous and compassionate’. Community businesses are an integral part of the social infrastructure but they are too often ignored by government – local and national – who focus more on what they can control and commission.

The Better Way roundtables for the North and Midlands have been full of rich and challenging discussions on how we can give more power and control to people in local communities. Whilst so much place-based work going on is patchy and messy, the drive to do things differently is real. The big questions of how we can join forces to create conditions of trust, safety, build capacity and remove barriers so new relationships can emerge are being discussed across the country. It is no coincidence that so much of this is happening outside the South East, in our post-industrial cities, our rural communities and our coastal towns – those places for which the system is most broken.

What I’ve seen is the emergence of a new kind of leadership – a radical approach which is creative, innovative and increasingly supported by progressive

funding approaches. But this work is harder and takes longer than many of us might have hoped. We have to persevere and identify barriers with brutal honesty and transparency.

Above all, this change is personal, and that can stop systems change in its tracks. Many people are being asked to fundamentally challenge their mental models, deeply rooted since childhood in ways that try to avoid vulnerability, culpability, any suggestion of incompetency or blame – we are all deeply defensive. Only when we can be vulnerable, accept the need to take risks, do things that may fail, learn as we go along in conditions which enable reflection and compassion, can we really do the kind of deep work that is necessary.

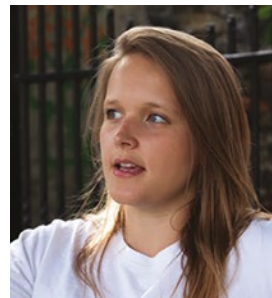
I really believe that, at some point, so many parts of systems in so many places will reach a tipping point that change will come. We can’t fix all this at once and we certainly don’t have all the answers, but by joining forces, forging new relationships, sharing and building power and listening to each other in the sometimes unexpected ways that happen within the Better Way Network, we can ready ourselves. I am full of optimism for the future, and will keep, as said by so many in the network, going where the energy is.

**Laura Seebohm was Executive Director at the northern charity Changing Lives, leading innovation and policy across the organisation, and also acted as our Convenor for the North (with support from Power to Change), until the end of 2021. She is now CEO of the Maternal Mental Health Alliance.**

HOW CAN WE  
UNLOCK OUR  
HUMANITY AND  
IMAGINATION?



# REWILDING THE IMAGINATION



By Phoebe Tickell

Across all of our discussions over the last year or so, many people have reflected that:

- Our humanity can build bridges and move us to change.
- Collective imagination can make a different future possible.
- There are ways to make a different kind of space to listen deeply to each other, share our stories, and tell new ones.

But some people may feel this is a distraction or are uncomfortable with opening up. How can we overcome that hesitancy and mainstream these approaches? Phoebe Tickell, our thought leader for this strand of enquiry, writes about this here.

How often do you feel that you nourish your sense of a better future?

I believe imagination is an extremely powerful force for change and humanity can build bridges and empower us to create worlds that are more in line with our values. Imagining allows us not just to see a different future but to explore the impacts of it happening through *feeling*. The problem is not that we lack imagination, but that we have often blocked it.

People are often surprised to hear that I trained as a scientist – a molecular biologist – but, when I would read about scientists in the past and about the process of their discoveries, I saw that imagination was

often a huge part of that. For example, August Kekulé, the German scientist who discovered the structure of benzene (a chemical compound in gasoline), had a dream of a snake forming a ring by catching its own tail and this led him to the discovery that benzene was shaped as a ring.

In the past, imagination, science and rational and imaginative processes used to be closer together but in the last 200 years as a result of the industrial revolution there's been a separation between the imaginative and artistic and science and the rational. Art and imagination have been sidelined and stripped of their power as reflected in the defunding of arts education and the superior salaries given to science and engineering graduates.

Art and imagination are seen as something nice to have but nothing to do with making change in the real world. But that's not true, and we need to bring them back together.

But it's not enough to increase imagination in our society. We need to rewild our imaginations. We're all born with natural capacities to imagine. Children have a boundless imagination but as we grow up our imagination is colonised, especially by schools, where there's just one right answer and we learn cookie cutter models of how to think.

The colonisation of the imagination is like the deforestation and monocropping of our forests. The imagination starts as a wild and boundless place, and over our lifetimes becomes more and more constrained, and rigid. Advertising, social media and Hollywood movies crowd the places that used to be nourished by time in nature, time in solitude, unstructured time for play.

There's research in the cognitive sciences that shows that there's one bit of the brain used for strategic, linear thinking and another which operates our creative, exploring and dreaming side, which lead us to discover innovations and a different world. They can't both operate at once and the use of one dampens down the other. So if we don't make time and dedicated space to use this other part of our brains, it doesn't get exercised.

In our society, the spaces for adults to play are mostly constrained, for example, to sports, or going to the pub. And opportunities to live a life of imagination are reserved for exceptionally privileged people, like designers, actors, artists and

film directors. This lack of imagination in our lives is an existential risk for society and humanity. Imagine the collective power we would have if this were not so.

I run an organisation, Moral Imaginations, which helps others to imagine a better world and make a better future possible, as well as to expand our sense of who we are and who we could be. Our methodology uses imagination exercises that evoke a shift in perspective in time perception, identity and connection to place and history.

We need three things to release our imaginative power and exercise that muscle:

- Dedicated time and space to unblock our imagination.
- Permission, which is often withheld in a performance culture, where people may fear humiliation or being laughed at if they exercise imagination.
- Help through portals and exercises, which unlocks not just the brain but also feeling.

An example of our work is the Imagination Lab we held over four days for the Onion Collective in Watchet in Somerset. The Collective brought together 25 diverse, local people to design their dream economy and through the lab they began to connect with a deep sense of time, nature and the place they lived in.

Many confessed that they were initially scared that this would be 'too hippy' but when given allowance to speak, they opened up deeply and personally, sharing feelings and events in their lives with others

in the group in a way that for some was potentially life changing. At the end of the four days, many said that they felt a real sense of grief that the lab had ended, and we started to hold weekly zoom meetings at their request to keep the conversation going. That continued for almost a year afterwards. As well as resulting in real changes – transforming the local harbour into a wonderful community space with exciting social enterprises which have transformed the local economy – the exercise led to a greater well-being and a sense of community for the individuals who took part.

One of the exercises we've created at Moral Imaginations is the Impossible Train Story, in which we imagine we are a group of people who live on that train. We work together to keep the train moving, which never stops, and the work is hard and inhumane. The train has been moving since we can remember, and we can't remember a life that was not on the train.

One day a fire breaks out and spreads throughout. The impossible happens; the brakes that no-one knew existed bring the train to a halt. We open the doors and get off, discovering birdsong and the feeling of the air on our skin, the sound of the rustling leaves of trees. And when we look ahead, we see that the train had been hurtling toward the edge of the cliff.

Many have died in the fire and there is now time to consider how we have been living. What is the purpose of keeping the train going? Could it be different? Some of us get to work, ripping up the track, though others are eager to get back on the train. Some have beliefs and investments in the train and can't face an alternative. It is a life or death situation. The impossible has happened, we've stopped the train.

At the end we ask the questions: How will the story end? What is there to lose? Who will you choose to be? Inviting people to participate in writing the end of the story and giving permission to imagine how things could be different is necessary for our survival.

Our futures lie in our hands.



The Watchet community's response to the Impossible Train story

Phoebe Tickell runs **Moral Imaginations**.



# UNLOCKING HUMANITY, IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY IN THE COMMUNITY



**By Audrey Thompson**

We've heard that collective imagination can make a different future possible and our humanity can build bridges and move us to change, but how can we translate these principles into practical action within a community? Audrey Thompson writes here about her experience of doing this in Doncaster.

How can people from different sections of the community be encouraged to come together – exchanging their ideas, planning together, taking a share of the workload, and sharing whatever resources are available – in order to bring about a fairer, more equal life for all?

Here is a little story I would like to share with you. It starts in 1970 when a new primary school was built in the village of Arksey, on the edge of Doncaster, where I lived with my husband and five children. The local authority decided the community could have the old school building for community activities, provided they could come up with a plan for its use. My husband and myself were invited to a meeting with others from the village to discuss ideas.

Above all, we decided, we wanted a youth club. After members of the community came together to decorate and clean the building,

my husband was appointed as leader, with myself as assistant leader. With the help of the community and a lot of creative thinking and imagination, we turned the old school into a community hub, with not only a youth club, but also a wives' group, a playgroup, a village Gala and more.

But soon a difficulty became apparent. Some children in the community were too young to be allowed into the youth club, and they used to hang around the door, trying all ways to enter and generally making a nuisance of themselves.

Some of the club members thought this was very unfair, but for insurance reasons I could not allow the young children to join the club. So we talked it through, and the club members came up with the idea of having one evening a week just for younger children over five years old.

We worked together and put forward a proposal to the management committee to open one evening a week. A group of young members and adults from the village offered to help. The Junior Club was a great success with lots of activities suitable for the children, using the many talents and enthusiasm of the young people, supported by adults.

This experience, and the learning from it, was valuable for all of us, and it helped grow our confidence, and further initiatives soon took place, drawing again and again on the creativity and imagination and goodwill of local people. In 1972 as part of my youth work training I worked with a group of young people to plan and run a project chosen by them. The outcome was an Easter Playscheme. This was how we set out our plan:

So, how did we make this happen? We started by using the group's contacts to ask for help in any way they could. And this worked very well. The sixth form at Don Valley High School raised funds. The school provided play equipment and craft stuff. Local factories gave us offcuts, wallpaper, lace and material. Even the colliery provided reams of paper, pens, and crayons. The Doncaster Book Club brought their caravan, and this became a base for story times, with books borrowed from the library.

That Easter the weather was cold and it snowed. But some of the residents took pity on us and we were invited into their homes, for toffee-making, storytelling, and singing accompanied by a guitar.

The project was a great success and I was able to produce an impressive folder to

## Proposal for Easter Playscheme 1972

**Why:** Complaints of vandalism and anti-social behaviour on a new housing estate were being reported by all sections of the community, especially during school holidays.

**What:** Provide events and activities that would involve all sections of the community. It was hoped that enjoying activities together and 'rubbing shoulders' with each other might promote good and lasting relationships and community cohesion on the new estate and the surrounding older village and continue after the event finished.

**Who:** All sections of the local and wider community who were interested in supporting the project.

**Where:** The new housing estate in Toll Bar, about four miles North of Doncaster, one of several distinct neighbourhoods within the Urban District Council of Bentley. It was isolated from the main area of Bentley by a hill and a railway line.

**When:** Easter school holidays.

hand in as my youth work project! It was well recorded with visual, audio and written reports. One of the main comments from the young people was that it would have been good to have more parents joining in, to which I replied, 'Where would you contact them?' Their answer came back, 'At school'.

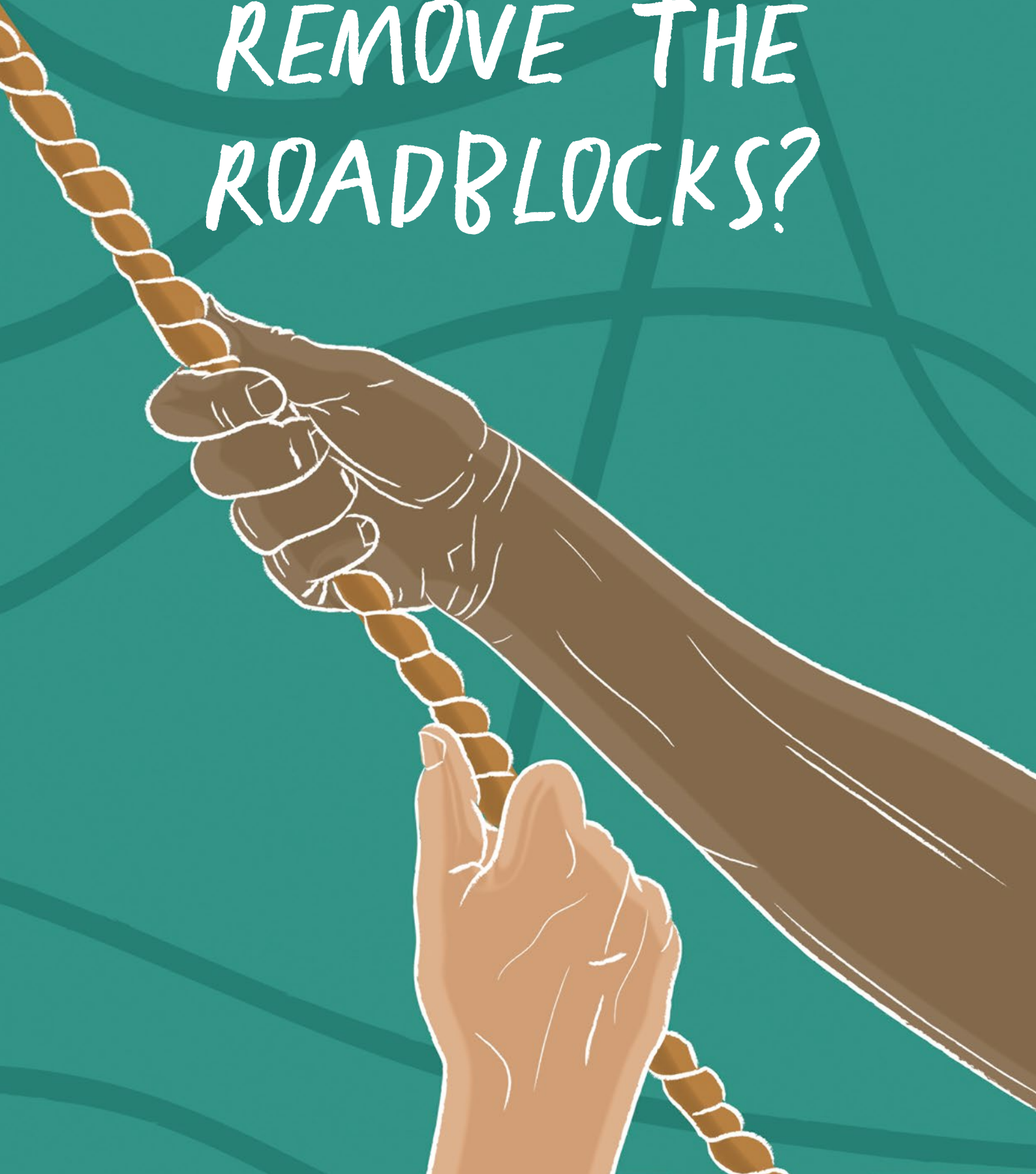
Lots of great things happened following this project, including my appointment at Bentley New Village primary school as a community project worker. I had attended this school as a child.

And so began quite a journey. For over 49 years I have worked with successive generations of young people and with the community in Greater Bentley as a

whole, continuing all the time to find ways to unlock the imagination, creativity and humanity that lies within. But that's another much longer story!

**Audrey Thompson was born in 1935, her father was a miner, she was married in 1954 and her husband died in 2003. She has five children and thirteen grandchildren. She worked for Doncaster Council as a Youth/Community/Social Education worker. She is currently a volunteer/Director of Bentley Library. Her hobbies include: gardening, textile and other crafts and listening to music.**

HOW CAN WE  
REMOVE THE  
ROADBLOCKS?



# HOW WE CAN BRIDGE DIVIDES



## By Neil Denton

Across all of our discussions, many people have reflected that resistance to change is widespread, whether through culture, systems or practices but we can still play a part in driving change by:

- Challenging and changing whatever stands in the way, including the deep-seated assumptions that can prevent us from being our best selves.
- Calling out inequalities and abuses of power, and making sure everyone can participate on their own terms.
- Assuming the best in others and seeing difference, conflict and division as an opportunity to pause, seek to understand, and find a fresh way.

Over 2022 we're looking more deeply at how to do this, with Neil Denton as our thought leader. He writes here about how conflict and division can be bridged.

I act as a mediator in situations where difference has become a divide, including in areas which have experienced a disaster, and I also reflect on the lessons in my work as an academic. Sometimes I ask myself why I do this work. Being a mediator is difficult and it can feel overwhelming and exhausting. Someone once said being a mediator is a bit like bringing a bucket of water to a drought and it's tempting to think, 'What's the point?' But a bucket of water can also be seen as a million little drops that can help seed new growth, if you carefully place them.

Very often even a crisis can end up in conflict. The initial stage often brings people together, especially at a neighbourhood level, and with those whose identity and circumstances we relate to, creating what academics call bonding social capital. However, these connections and collaborations can fade as time goes by, and people begin to acknowledge that their own needs differ from others. As communities become aware of these differences, the energy generated by a disaster can change from being a force that brings people together, to one that drives people apart.

The Covid pandemic, for example, has brought many neighbourhoods closer, at least in the early stages, but it has also brought inequality into plain sight. As the pandemic wore on, we saw a reduction in connections and collaborations with groups 'not like us' (what academics call bridging social capital), with an increase in 'out-group' blaming, for example between vaccine advocates and anti-vaxxers, where the potential for destructive conflict is real. We can see this in the quality of public debate in recent years. Debate and disagreement has become more 'tribal' and polarised. There is a lot more shouting than listening.

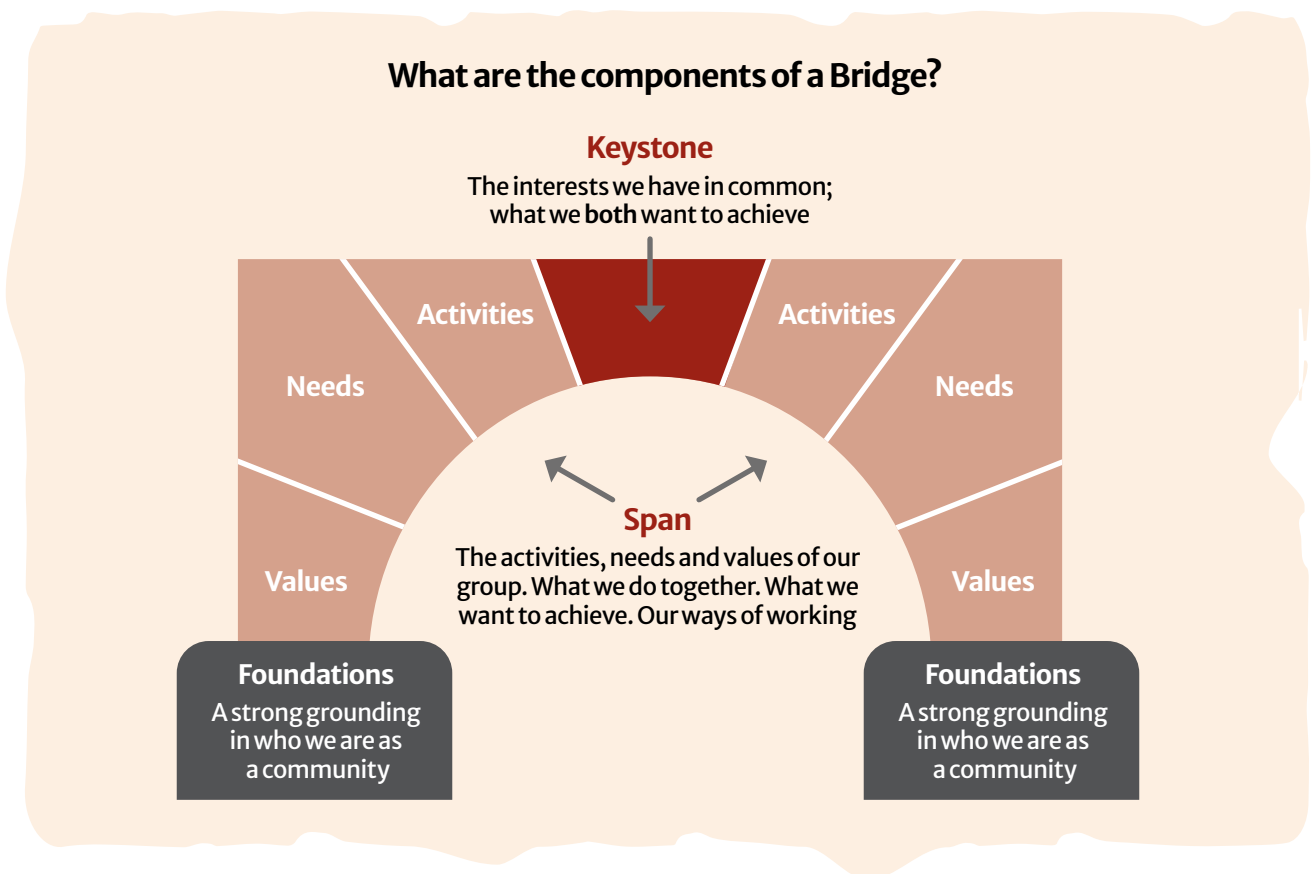
Differences, if managed well, can help us all see the world in fresh ways and achieve positive change. But what happens when conflict develops is what Marshall Rosenberg – in his work on NonViolent Communication – calls 'enemy thinking'.

We stick labels on people, seeing them as good or bad, blaming others and always starting with what is wrong. Words like 'I can't, you have to and they must' go with an 'either/or' mentality in which we either win or we lose. That's how wars begin. In peacetime, people are curious. They don't say that they know what the other group are thinking, they try to find out.

So how do we build bridges when differences become divides?

With the Relationships Project I have written the Bridge Builders Handbook, which sets out the critical components of how to build a bridge. This diagram sets out what a good bridge looks like.

What you don't do is build the bridge from the middle. If you try to start from superficial points of connection and



similarity, the bridge eventually falls down. What you need instead are strong foundations on either side first.

A mediator in these circumstances sits in both camps, listening with their eyes, head and heart and looking at the activities, needs and values of each community to see if they can build a story about them that will make sense to the other group, so that differences stop being deal-breakers and start becoming objects of curiosity. That's how you build a lasting keystone. It is held in place by genuine connection to the values, needs and activities of both two strands. The trick is to find legitimate goals that work for both groups and don't harm either. For example, not keeping a park safe by keeping the other group out, but making it safer and inclusive for everyone in the community. The energy for change comes out of genuine partnership.

This work is messy. It won't all go to plan and that's ok, as long as we keep talking to each other, and remain open to surprises.

You need a compass, not a map, in which you keep aware of two things at once – where we want to go, and where we are now – and accept that the exact route is uncertain. It's like putting bi-focals on, keeping sight of the goal, but being attentive and responsive to the everyday happenings.

Above all, you need to give it time. Time to be kind to ourselves and each other. Time to reach across empty and suspicious spaces and to place the drops from the bucket of water in a way that brings lasting change.

**Neil Denton is an Independent Community Mediator and a Professor in Practice with the After Disasters Network at Durham University who specialises in conflict transformation. He also works with the Relationships Project, with whom he has produced the Bridge Builders Handbook.**

# DON'T BUILD BRIDGES FROM THE MIDDLE



**By Tom Neumark**

We've been looking at how to see difference, conflict and division as an opportunity to pause, seek to understand, and find a fresh way, one of the cross-cutting questions on tackling roadblocks emerging from our discussions last year. Tom Neumark writes here about what he's learnt from his experience of trying to do this.

As I looked out onto a half empty floodlit pitch, I kept repeating a simple question to myself, 'Why is this going so wrong? Everyone loves football!' I had tried to organise a girls' football group but almost no one had shown up.

The idea had been to bring people together over their shared interests, to build a bit of community in a highly segregated neighbourhood, but it had not worked. A few kids had shown up from the local estate, barely enough to get a kickabout going, and none had come from the leafier streets up the hill. One parent, expressing a mild interest, had tentatively enquired 'Will there be any rough kids going?' I never saw her again.

Now I realise that the reason for this failure is that I was, in the words of Neil Denton, trying to build a bridge by starting in the middle. This is a recipe for disaster.

Instead, as Neil lays out in his *Bridge Builder's Handbook*, you should start from something, not from nothing.

The football project had started from a problem, an absence, a need. It had started from a lack of community cohesion. It had started from nothing. It had not started from a group of girls that love playing football or from a group of parents who wanted to design fun activities with their kids.

In Neil's term, you need to 'establish your foundations' and 'build your span' before you 'reach out to another group'. I had raced to the finish line before going through all the initial steps and had fallen on my face.

What do they say about houses that are built on sand? The same can be said for bridges that are built from the middle out. This is a timely and important observation, given our divided societies.



There is no shortage of people decrying how polarised our society is, and no shortage of people offering solutions. Invariably these solutions fail because they are based on the idea of using some form of activity to bring people together, as a way of healing divides. They are focused on building the bridge by starting in the middle.

Activities can bring people together. Football can be a great way for people from different backgrounds to get to know each other, to break down stigma, but a game of football, just like any other activity, has to be organised in the right way and by the right organisations, otherwise no one will show up or, worse still, they may have a negative experience that reinforces their prejudices.

We are lucky to live in a country full of groups that are passionate about running activities in their communities. There are more people still that would love to be involved but have never been asked and are not sure how to start.

Rather than building bridges from the middle out, we would be much better off

getting to know the people that already do so much in our communities and supporting these often beleaguered and besieged groups to 'expand their span'.

After the failed football project, I changed tack and spent my time listening to the community. Quite quickly I found someone who loved basketball and wanted to get a team going. He was just one of several people in the area that were keen to get involved in a variety of different ways, from photography to parties to newspapers. I supported them to start or develop their activities and, over time, I noticed they started to use a common language, referring to their work, their neighbourhood and each other, using similar terms to each other. We had started to develop a shared keystone. The middle of the bridge was the end of the journey, not the beginning.

**Tom Neumark is CEO of 999 Club a charity in South East London supporting people to escape homelessness for good.**

# GETTING BETTER AT OVERCOMING RESISTANCE



By Roger Martin

When we've been discussing how to remove the roadblocks to change, we've concluded it's important to challenge and change whatever stands in the way, including the deep-seated assumptions that can prevent us from being our best selves. Roger Martin reflects on this here.

I'm inspired by the Better Way principles and behaviours. They speak to what I think we collectively need at this time.

And they cause resistance. In myself primarily.

Let me share how I became aware of this and what has helped me overcome it, with reference to two of the Better Way behaviours.

**Sharing And Building Power, because power is held in too few hands, and we all have more power than we think to change things for the better**

Ever since the age of seven, when a teacher hit both my open palms with a wooden ruler as punishment for a misdemeanour I didn't commit, I've had trouble trusting those with power.

Over time, beliefs connected to this event gathered momentum. They had headlines like 'Power corrupts,' and 'Be wary of authority'. Looking back, many of my subsequent interactions with others, provided yet more evidence they were true.

At the time though I was unaware of these beliefs. They lay hidden in my sub-conscious. All I felt was resistance whenever I had to ask those with power for resources or a favour. I showed up feeling suspicious. My 'what's right-and-fair' radar was in overdrive. Had I been conscious of the notion of *sharing* and *building* power, it would have seemed alien.

Recently all this changed. When a mentor helped me join the dots between my unjust punishment, the belief system it catalysed and the resistance I felt in the company of those with power, it led to several realisations.

I saw for the first time how beliefs form and get confirmed as truths via subsequent experiences. In the vocabulary of psychology, what I was ‘projecting’ on to others became clear.

Clarity helped me entertain the idea that some leaders experienced power as a privilege to be used wisely, not a corrupting ego boost. I became tearful whenever watching Nelson Mandela for instance. To me his actions showed how he understood ‘the we’ not just ‘us and them’. Less attached to my truth about how power corrupts in every case, I saw how many have similar traits. They’re everywhere. I just hadn’t seen them.

Gradually, the grip of resistance lessened. I spoke from a place of curiosity inside, not fear and suspicion. I stopped assuming I knew what power does to colleagues. And to my surprise, they not only started *sharing* it with me, but I was able to *build* on it too. By holding lightly what I’d always believed to be true, I rediscovered some assemblance of my own power.

If I’m frank, I feel cautious about sharing personal realisations like these. They can look obvious and trite to some. Self-indulgent even. But I do so knowing clarity eludes us when we’re caught up in beliefs we’re unaware of and only have resistance-like feelings to go on.

Nowadays I try to read such feelings as a signal I’ve not yet joined all the relevant dots.

### **Listening To Each Other, particularly those least heard, because that is the only way to find out what’s not working and discover what will**

How often do you feel really heard and your humanity affirmed as a result? In my experience this is a rare occurrence for many.

Why might this be?

I used to consider myself a good listener. I’d justify this claim by pointing to how comprehensive my notes were. This, alas, turned out to be erroneous.

As am I, we’re all prone to listen to reply, or to negate, or to confirm, based on the mental or written notes we’ve made. This is quite different to listening to understand.

In my case for example, when someone was speaking, in effect I listened to my thinking and interpretation of what they were saying, not what was actually being expressed. Only when I stopped taking copious notes did I fully appreciate the difference it made.

Another distinction I found helpful, especially when disagreements were in the air, was not to conflate listening to someone with agreeing with them. Seeing these as two separate processes freed me to focus on the former and resist the temptation to agree or disagree until I fully understood another’s position.

Inevitably, when listening, thoughts flood the mind. They can either entertain us – by drawing our attention away from what the person we’re conversing with wants to express – or we can entertain them.

In the latter case, a thought experiment that helped me – which I invite you to try out yourself – is to simply notice when your mind does the following, and instead of letting your attention and curiosity play along, bring them back to *what* the person before you is saying and *how*.

- Drifts.
- Interprets and immediately compares and contrasts.
- Wants to interrupt with questions (so deprives the speaker of time to collect their thoughts.)
- Agrees and confirms what it likes to hear.
- Disagrees with what causes discombobulation.
- Worries about how you'll respond when your turn comes.

When I notice thought-related distractions like these, and don't play along, it's easier for me, and the person in front of me, to uncover *what's not working*. In most cases, when I've been fully present, heard what they have to say, and play that back, our desire to explore *what will work* grows.

Imagine if this seemed true to most of us: when removing roadblocks and overcoming resistance to the Better Way, we each have more influence than might first appear.

**Roger Martin is a Co-Founder of The Mindset Difference – a niche consultancy focused on helping leaders and teams be at their best, irrespective of the circumstances they face. Having witnessed the limitations in conventional methods of developing leaders and teams, the business was set up to offer a new approach. Put simply one that helps people subtract or take less seriously thinking habits that inhibit access to innate human qualities such as openness, creativity, resilience, compassion, collaboration, innovation, resourcefulness, courage and root cause problem solving. The very same qualities that bring out the best in teams, those they serve and create a one-team, can-do culture.**

**'YOU'VE GOT TO STOP HIM HITTING YOU IN FRONT OF YOUR CHILDREN!'**



## By Kristian Tomblin

Across our discussions in 2021 and beyond, we've heard about the many roadblocks that stand in the way of change. Kristian Tomblin writes here about his experience of challenging and changing the obstacles that stand in the way of reforming public services, including the deep-seated assumptions that prevent us from being our best selves.

I work for a Top Tier Authority. I am a Principal Commissioning Manager, that puts me above Commissioning Managers but below the Chief Principal Commissioning Manager. I work in a grade 2\* listed Building. Its corridors are clad in Italian marble and its offices lined with oak panelling.

It reeks of patriarchy, tradition and old power.

In a definition taken from the internet, OLD POWER can be characterised by:

- Managerialism, institutional, representative governance.
- Exclusivity, competition, authority, resource consolidation.
- Discretion, confidentiality, separation between private and public sphere.
- Professionalism, specialism.
- Long term affiliation and loyalty, less overall participation.

I've spent a good chunk of my professional life in suits and ties, in formal office meetings poring over data trying to catch commissioned services out – it's a truth isn't it that 'providers' want to cut corners, shave costs, maximise margins. Commissioners know that. We want to squeeze the pips!!

I commission domestic abuse services. More specifically, risk management for people (women) at imminent, possible risk of being killed.

About five years ago, I had an epiphany. I spent time in the lives of people the services I commissioned were there to help. I sat in people's living rooms and kitchens and they told me their stories. I heard that our services don't talk to men or challenge abuse of power in relationships, we reduce complex human issues to a series of 'problems' or deficits our services are commissioned to deal with, we deal in crisis and fail to support prevention or recovery.

Access or eligibility to services is contingent on whether levels of distress and risk are assessed as severe enough!

The sorriest thing I heard of was social workers telling victims of domestic violence (always women victims) – ‘you’ve got to stop him hitting you in front of your children or we’ll have to take them away from you.’

The second sorriest thing I heard was that, out of hundreds of professional encounters, only a handful of people – and what they did – were seen as being helpful or valued. And all of these examples were because they went ‘above and beyond’. They were working outside of what was described in their job description! Or their ‘service specification’.

Their special skills, knowledge, job title, professional affiliation weren’t valued. The things that were valued were: being kind, compassionate, persistent and non-judgemental. Being Human.

People working in services frequently told me they weren’t able to work in accordance with their values. They paid a price for this in their energy, motivation and wellbeing.

Has old power-driven humanness out of human services?

My epiphany? That I was (am?) complicit in a system that causes harm. Looking from my perspective of managing commissioned services through my ‘old power lens,’ performance data, things looked great! Markets, competition, professionalism and specialisms work.

I was more naïve back then and I thought that presenting these stories back to the system would be a catalyst for change. How could we continue to hold in place a system that we know is routinely causing harm?

Well, it wasn’t, and we could!

I’m no expert in systems change but I’m learning. Understanding and working to reveal and change the dynamics of power is crucial.

I’m trying to develop my own practice in ‘new power’ as a means of exploring and bringing about transformation.

NEW POWER (as defined on the internet) can be characterised as:

- Informal, opt-in decision making, self-organisation, networked governance.
- Open-source collaboration, crowd wisdom, sharing.
- Radical transparency.
- Do-it-ourselves, ‘maker culture’.
- Short term, conditional affiliation, more overall participation.

I’m learning to challenge old power and build new. Building networks of fellow travellers seeking a paradigm shift.

And what does that look like? Well...

We’ve started a ‘trauma network’ – a place for people in our system (working in it and receiving support from it) to connect and build communities of practice, learn together and from each other, about how to better understand and respond to people’s distress.

We're moving away from competition and target cultures and instead building alliances where organisations cooperate towards shared ambitions. We're orientating towards valuing thoughtful reflective practice and learning as the key currency of our alliances.

We're listening to people who need support and learning about their lives. Not jumping to conclusions about the services they need but co-designing bespoke responses with them.

And we're learning how to tell the story of failure and waste inherent in many current models of service delivery and helping people ready for change to connect with a better way of working.

**Kristian Tomblin lives and works in the beautiful county of Devon. He is a proud public servant and sees himself very much in the service of our citizens. He is increasingly drawn to recognising and embracing the complex nature of the challenges he works on and the importance of 'whole system' responses.**



# IN THE FACE OF ALL THE CHALLENGES, DESPAIR IS NOT AN OPTION



**By Duncan Shrubsole**

The roadblocks to a Better Way are many and, as set out in *Building a Bigger We*, we've been gathering insights about how we can tackle them. In this concluding essay to this publication, Duncan Shrubsole reflects on the challenges we face and on how we should respond to them.

Our times are terrifying, bewildering and immensely challenging.

War in Europe – millions of refugees, rape, torture, destruction and death, taking us back to scenes reminiscent of the Second World War. The cost-of-living crisis affecting all but pushing millions who were already on the edge over it. The climate crisis, ever starker, yet the will to tackle it slipping away. Partygate and the loss of trust in our leaders and politics when we need good leadership more than ever. A raft of long-term challenges that don't hit the headlines but shape them nonetheless – poverty, racism, lack of housing, underfunding of our public services, mental ill-health, social fragmentation and more.

And, given this pace of events, we have barely had the opportunity to process the last two years and the level of trauma that people individually and collectively experienced from Covid, lockdowns and their ongoing impacts.

It can feel easy to despair. But for those of us who want a better, fairer, greener world, despair is not an option. In a blog I wrote back in May 2020 I said: 'So we who will a better world need to be putting in the hard graft now to build the practical, policy and political cases for the changes we seek and persuading people to make it happen.' Nearly two years on that seems even more, not less, important.

So how can we build a country and beyond where, as a Better Way calls for, 'Everyone is heard and believed in, given a fair opportunity to thrive, and the ability to influence the things that matter to them'? How can we turn frustration to action, despair to resolve, deliberation to real change – not just willing a better world but actively helping it to happen?

I humbly suggest six things:



**1. Understand the context we are living through and working in** – to remake the world we also have to understand it – the trends that are helpful, as well as the challenges and the blockers. The NCVO Road Ahead document is a good place to start but much can also be gleaned from an inquiring mind and constant conversation with those swimming with us, those stuck in the tide and those we must win over.

**2. Focus on the cause not the organisation** – the challenges we face are too big for any one of us. The model of the heroic individual leader or large brand are certainly not up to the task. We need to focus on advancing causes and building movements, not individual organisations. Easy to say, sometimes hard to do, particularly if you are a charity trying to bring in enough income to keep the lights on. That's why it's most incumbent on those who have the broadest shoulders to carry the largest load – funders, larger charities, established leaders – to reach out and across, ask what they can do to help, not, as was too often the case in the past, expecting others to fall in line. This also requires us all to look out for and after each other.

**3. Build from the ground up** – we all saw that the things that worked best during lockdowns were built and led locally and the things that failed were top-down and led by central government (Test and Trace and its utter waste of £37 billion being the prime example). As we captured in research we commissioned at Lloyds Bank Foundation, small and local charities played a particularly

important role in responding to the big crisis of Covid that we faced. And 150,000 households signing up to host refugees in communities right across the UK is shaming the callous incompetence and rigid bureaucracy of the Home Office. So street by street, community by community, region by region, nation by nation we can and must come together to build an effective response to the challenges we face.

**4. Look for allies not enemies, build bridges not dividing lines** – we know there are politicians, newspapers and others seeking to create and fan the flames of 'culture wars'. Whilst we must be resolute in defending positions when under attack, evidence suggests the public are much less interested than those fanning the flames think. We also need to be honest with ourselves that sometimes in our own passion for a cause we can be too quick to mistrust the motives of those who disagree with us on a course of action, missing that they actually shared our concern, and just had a different view of how to get there. Even where there are MPs, newspapers and institutions who may hold views on certain issues that we find challenging, we should seek to tap into the things that do positively motivate them – indeed mobilising 'unusual suspects' has been key to many victories. And in our choice and use of language we can sometimes alienate potential friends and allies, making issues harder to resolve not easier.

**5. Celebrate, be inspired by and learn from all the fantastic changes that have been achieved** – as the old saying

goes, wherever there is human misery 'look for the helpers'. Ukraine is sadly giving us a masterclass in this now. But despite all of the challenges I started this blog with, campaigns are being won on a regular basis on a whole range of issues – Kirsty McNeill is running this list of **campaign successes in 2022** alone. They should each inspire us and we should actively learn from them.

**6. Don't stop believing** – as the song says!

We know it can be done, change can be achieved. The vote, gay rights, the NHS, the United Nations, the Geneva Convention, the welfare state, action on climate change, international debt

relief, the end of Apartheid, changing attitudes to mental health and so, so much more were all won through people campaigning, arguing, fighting, mobilising, protesting and persuading.

We in civil society must be the thinkers, the dreamers, the uniters, the builders, the lifter-uppers, the change makers. Let's get to it!

**Duncan Shrubsole is Director of Policy, Research and Communication for the Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales and is writing in a personal capacity.**



# A BETTER WAY

A Better Way is a network across different sectors committed to changing the way things work for the better – improving services, building community and creating a fairer society.

For more information, or if you'd like to take part, visit our website:

[www.betterway.network](http://www.betterway.network)

 @betterwaynetwrk

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