

# A CALL TO ACTION FOR A BETTER WAY



# A CALL TO ACTION FOR A BETTER WAY

We are a network of people across society who are calling for a radical shift to liberate the power of connection and community. That power is created when:

- 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.

This isn't happening now. Too many people and communities are left out and left behind. Our national conversation often leaves us feeling powerless. It's true that power is in too few hands. But there are actions we can take to challenge this and principles we can follow.

# THE BETTER WAY ACTIONS



Sharing power with people and communities

Too often, policies and systems divide and disempower and politicians and organisations hoard rather than share power. Instead, we can:

- Create platforms and channels for everyone to influence what matters to them.
- Build confidence and capacity for individuals and communities to take more power.
- Stop thinking national or big is best and realise the power of communities and place.



### Changing practices to help people thrive, not just cope

Practitioners can lack real ambition for those they serve, treating them like problems rather than the solution, and depersonalising services. Instead, we can:

- See the potential in everyone and stop services becoming a 'problem industry'.
- Put humanity and kindness into services.
- Raise the ambition of services through knowledge-sharing and continuous feedback.



### Changing organisations to focus on communities and solutions

Some agencies end up pursuing organisational interest and survival and lose sight of their real mission. Instead, we can:

- Put those we serve first, listening to and reflecting them in everything we do.
- Start creating connection and community, not just passive services, for people.



### Collaborative leadership to achieve systemic change

Our systems and leadership styles often force organisations to compete against each other rather than collaborating to achieve the changes people need. Instead, we can:

- Seek to rewire funding, commissioning, procurement and governance practices to support collective action.
- Abandon organisational silos and become 'systems' leaders.
- Develop common causes and shared outcomes, within and across sectors.

We know this change is possible for individuals, communities and society from the many examples, ideas and commitments put forward within our network which we include in the final section of this Call to Action.

# THE BETTER WAY PRINCIPLES

As we pursue these actions, we are striving to follow these principles, which we have also drawn up together as a network:

- **Prevention is better than cure.** We all need help throughout our lives, and benefit from 'right first time' support, sometimes at early stages, sometimes at moments of crisis or difficulty. We also need strong communities that build readiness, resilience and resourcefulness, and national systems and policies which help people to thrive, not undermine them.
- **Building on strengths is better than focusing on weaknesses.** Even in the most difficult circumstances people and communities have much to offer. They are well placed to come up with the solutions, and to take action accordingly. Defining people by their 'needs' or deficits, and doing things for or to rather than with them, creates dependency. Creating conditions where people can flourish on their own terms sets them free.
- **Relationships are better than transactions.** Deep value is generated through relationships between people and the commitments people make to each other. We find this first and foremost in families, communities and neighbourhoods, but organisations in every sector need to do more to treat people with humanity and as individuals and so generate deep value too.
- **Collaboration is better than competition.** Collaboration is the best way to address complex social issues and we need to develop leadership styles that support it. Price-based competitive tendering for public services is harming society and wasting taxpayers' money. Rather than a destructive, value-squeezing contest among a few big corporations in pursuit of shareholder profit, we need a collaborative method that brings together people with a shared interest in a common challenge.

- **Mass participation is better than centralised power.** Power is concentrated in the hands of too few people. More decisions should be made by larger groups of people with a shared interest or expertise in the subject, starting with those whose voices have not been heard: ‘no decisions about us without us’. Moreover, public agencies, charities and businesses achieve most when they move away from command and control by the few and stimulate the resourcefulness of the many.
- **Local is better than national.** People need the power to shape the places they live and work in. Some things do need to be organised at national level and stewardship is a shared task but governments and other national agencies should stick to what they do well and stop trying to organise services and community life from the centre, set out aspirations not blueprints, recognise the value of locally based organisations, and only get involved in things which local people can’t or won’t do by themselves.
- **Principles are better than targets.** All too often universal targets, standard setting and inspection regimes fail to encourage the best behaviours or prevent the worst. There is a place for government

to set expectations and raise standards. But quality is a continual process, emerging from principles of human dignity, best reinforced by reflective practice, citizen engagement, challenge and accountability, and experts in lived experience are the best starting point.

- **Changing ourselves is better than demanding change from others.** Challenge is important but we can begin with what we ourselves can do, putting the common good first and our vested interests last. The more we achieve, the more others will follow.

## JOIN US

We are a growing network of people with many different backgrounds – from the social, public and private sectors – who are making things happen in the spirit of a Better Way, across the country. We have come together to ignite fresh thinking, create inspiration and build momentum.

Help us to make this Better Way mainstream and join us.

# THEORY INTO PRACTICE: WHAT OUR NETWORK SAYS

This isn't just good theory, but is also being put into practice by people in our network. If you'd like to hear more about the examples below, go to our resources or blog web pages, or look in *Insights for A Better Way*, all available on [www.betterway.network](http://www.betterway.network).



## Sharing power with people and communities

### Creating platforms and channels for everyone to influence what matters to them

- Sue Tibballs from SMK says **the social sector should recognise its latent 'social power'** to articulate the need for change and give voice to those who have least say now.
- So Jung Rim from the Social Innovation Exchange explains how they are **creating innovative platforms** that bring in unheard and diverse voices, based on practice in Seoul.
- Steve Reed MP, speaking at our sharing power roundtable, said there was a need to 'double down on democracy', requiring **bottom up political renewal accompanied by change at the top**, and a new settlement between the citizen and the state.
- At the same roundtable, participants thought we needed to

tell **new stories and use different language** that show shared power comes from persuasion and consensus rather than through hierarchy and coercion.

- Sufina Ahmad from the City of London Corporation points out we need to recognise where power and privilege lies, and make a start by **doing what we can within our own organisations to shift power**.
- Mark Johnson from User Voice calls on policy makers to give power to **experts in lived experience** to shape policy, as they have succeeded in doing for ex-offenders.
- Simon Shaw at Sustain gives examples of how they have engaged people with experience of food poverty to develop **'food power'** – preventative and long-term responses that will work for them.
- Richard Bridge, an expert in community action, argues that we need to disrupt and distribute political power, with **Citizens' Assemblies** being one way.

## Building capacity in individuals and communities to take power

- Audrey Thompson, who has a lifetime's experience of working with communities in Doncaster, argues for investment in **'local connectors'** to build the trust and solidarity communities need to take power.
- Nick Gardham from Community Organisers writes about what they are doing to **build trust and capacity in alienated communities**.
- Avril McIntyre from Community Resources in Barking and Dagenham explains that **building strong relationships and social capital** helps people take power.
- In network discussions, we've identified the importance of creating a **'constructive sense of entitlement'** in those who don't believe in their own ability to change things.
- Alison Gelder explains what they are doing in Together for the Common Good to equip children to become **active citizens through education**.
- Rhannon Bearne from Changing Lives, a social inclusion charity from the North of England, says organisations should help individuals **shape their own sources of power**, rather than simply coaching them to talk to existing sources.
- Matt Leach from Local Trust describes how **funders can devolve power, resources and control to community level**, and can help make this work by providing unconditional support over the long term.

## Recognising the power of communities and place

- Peter Holbrook from Social Enterprise UK argues that we need **new economic models, including social enterprise**, and a radical shift in the system so that the health and wealth of our planet, communities and people are prioritised over economic growth.
- Our network discussions have concluded that **big is not always best**: national and local organisations each have strengths, but we should stop seeing scaling up as the route to more impact.
- As founding group member Polly Neate from Shelter argues, **large charities should not compete against local ones**, where local charities can do a better job.
- Nicola Butler cites Hackney in relation to play services as a good example of a council **giving value to an understanding of local needs when commissioning services**, which helps local organisations gain contracts against national competitors.
- Within our network, we've also recognised that **civil society organisations should build connection and trust with those served** and be properly accountable to them, as advocated by Civil Society Futures' PACT.



**Changing practices to help people thrive, not just cope**

## See the potential in everyone and stop services becoming a ‘problem industry’

- Colin Falconer says **practitioners should focus on strengths not weaknesses**, pointing to ‘Advantaged Thinking’ as a model, which he developed with one of our founding members, the late Jane Slowey, at the Foyer Federation. He suggests **seven Advantaged Thinking questions** practitioners should ask themselves.
- Nick Sinclair from the Local Area Coordination Network writes about these seven questions and similar principles applied by local authorities in his network to shift the paradigm from public management and controlling resource towards one of **co-production and community investment**.
- Matt Kepple, speaking at our roundtable on changing practices, said practitioners often seek to do remedial work, but should be **moving the dial from zero to 1**, not minus 1 to zero: so much more could be achieved with better feedback on impact.
- Lawrence Walker and New Direction are also using a more positive, less problem-based approach to **build ‘cultural capital’** among young people in London.

- Rick Henderson from Homeless Link argues for prevention not acute services and says the key is to **always treat homeless people as people first**, with rights, strengths and aspirations.
- In a number of Better Way discussions, participants have said we should **stop using the language of ‘disadvantage’ and challenge ‘hostile environment’ policies** wherever we see them, and should **avoid negative fund-raising practices** which characterise beneficiaries as ‘other’ or as problems.

## Putting humanity and kindness into services

- Julia Unwin from Civil Society Futures and our founding member David Robinson both tell personal stories about how **humanity and kindness can make all the difference** in public services.
- David Robinson says we need to **consciously build relationships and connections in communities** and exercise humanity in how services are delivered, as he is doing in his Relationships Project.
- Richard Wilson explains that ‘good help’ is **supporting people to feel hopeful, identify their own purpose and confidently take action**, drawing on the many examples of good practice and principles uncovered by his Good Help, Bad Help project.



- Edel Harris shows through the Local Cornerstone model in Scotland that care and indeed other services can throw away the rule book and **give more power to the front line**, so that practitioners can put those they work with first.

### Raise the ambition of services through knowledge sharing and continuous feedback

- Matt Kepple from Makerble advocates creating a network of 'curious' people and establishing a version of Wikipedia for those working in the social sector to **share what works** and be a collective force for good.
- Bethia McNeil from the Centre for Youth Impact calls for the **rejection of damaging high-stakes targets in favour of principles**, as these are more likely to support the behaviours that will deliver better outcomes.
- Graeme Duncan from Right to Succeed, which works to improve educational outcomes in disadvantaged areas, says **locally led, research informed, collective approaches, with capacity building** would be more effective than the current target led regime.
- Liz Richardson tells a personal story to illustrate that **principles and learning are better than prescription and instructing**.
- Mark Gamsu argues for **new metrics** that reflect the profound nature of the challenge, rather than superficial measurement.



**Changing organisations**  
to focus on communities  
and solutions

### Put those we serve first, listening to and reflecting them in everything we do

- Karin Woodley explains how she has used '**radical listening**' at Cambridge House in Southwark to make sure the people inside the organisation truly reflect those served in what they do and who they are.
- Alicia Moore, writing as a 16 year old student, feels that the education system is failing to **listen or adapt to those who do not fit the mould**.
- Steven Platts writes that at Groundswell they've found **experts in lived experience can give better support** than professionals in helping homeless people access health services because they really understand what's needed.
- Polly Neate writes about her leadership work in Shelter to **change the culture of an organisation, using Better Way principles**.
- Kate Welch from Social Enterprise Acumen gives her own personal account of **making space to really listen to what people in communities want**.

## Start creating connection and community, not just passive services, for people

- Clare Wightman from Grapevine Coventry and Warwickshire illustrates the **power of personal support networks**, compared to conventional services.
- Sarah Hughes from the Centre for Mental Health describes how **'Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Learn and Give'** are principles linked by experts to good mental health.
- Our co-convenor, Steve Wyler, explains how **support from neighbours** rather than being taken into care was what worked best for an elderly neighbour living alone.
- Amy Middleton from the Mayday Trust argues from her own experience working with homeless people that **relationships, not organisations, are what people most need**.
- Ollie Bachelor from the Bensham Food Co-op in Gateshead shows from their experience that **co-operative models** can give people an opportunity to participate and help others rather than be passive.
- Sona Mahtani explains how the Selby Centre in Tottenham has created **inclusive communities where diverse people, cultures and organisations come together**.
- Our co-convenor, Caroline Slocock from Civil Exchange and the Early Action Task Force, argues for **investment in social infrastructure** – the spaces, buildings, facilities and services that can help unlock the power of connection and community.



## Collaborative leadership to achieve systemic change

### Seek to rewire funding, commissioning, procurement and governance practices to support collective action

- Toby Lowe from Newcastle University Business School explains that **co-ordinated action matches the complexity of individual lives, issues and systems** and better addresses structural causes.
- Collaborative commissioning can be one route, but our network has identified the key is **collective discussion about what is to be commissioned**, rather than over-engineered new models of commissioning.
- At our roundtable on collaborative leadership, participants said that **funders should support spontaneity and risk taking**, recognising that individual organisations can rarely specify exactly what they will achieve and should learn and adapt along the way.
- **Practices and governance should put the bigger cause first**, not the organisation, we concluded in our network discussions.

## Abandon organisational silos and become 'systems' leaders

- Our founding member Kathy Evans from Children England has written it's important to **follow your heart not your head, and learn to embrace risk to change the system.**
- Founding cell member Cate Newnes-Smith from Youth Focus in Surrey advocates acting as **'holistic systems leaders'** to understand the real issues in people's lives and work across organisations and sectors to deliver shared goals.

## Develop common causes and shared outcomes, within and across sectors

- Maurice Wren from the Refugee Council suggests **'ecologies' or 'eco-systems'** rather than formal partnerships or movements, as members coming from different perspectives can coalesce gradually around a shared vision, as in the Detention Alliance.
- Also speaking at our roundtable on collaboration, Rick Henderson from Homeless Link said a lesson from the successful Making Every Adult Matter partnership is that

knowledge of the issues is just as, if not more, important than turnover and size.

- Former MP and writer Tom Levitt shows that **alliances can and are being forged between the voluntary and private sector** to mutual advantage.
- The example of Groundswell working with Shelter and Crisis illustrates **smaller, specialist organisations can be in the driving seat in partnerships with larger agencies.**
- Cate Newnes-Smith in Surrey explains how leaders in her area came together to identify **a shared set of principles** to improve life chances for children and young people.
- And of course, as Steve Wyler points out, the **Better Way network is itself an example** of a collaborative eco-system.

We are discovering more all the time – contact us if you have experience or ideas you'd like to share with us.



# ABOUT OUR CALL TO ACTION AND NETWORK

This document is the result of three years of discussion within our network about how to improve services and strengthen communities. In the coming years, we hope to see the changes we advocate put into practice more widely and to grow our network.

A Better Way is hosted by Civil Exchange, and co-ordinated by Caroline Slocock and Steve Wyler. We work in partnership with the Carnegie UK Trust, with the support of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

If you'd like to find out more, please visit our website, [www.betterway.network](http://www.betterway.network) or follow us on twitter @betterwaynetwrk.

Published by Civil Exchange in partnership with the Carnegie UK Trust, with additional support from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

Design by LBD Creative

Copyright: Creative Commons, November 2019