

# TIME FOR A CHANGE

A rallying call for a Better Way





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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several hundred people across our network have contributed to the thinking in this document in large and small gatherings over 2020, offering their experience and insights and working up these ideas together. We thank you all.

### ABOUT A BETTER WAY

The Better Way is a network of people across society exploring how to improve services and build strong communities. Together we have drawn up eight principles for a Better Way and published a collection of Insights for a Better Way, A Call to Action for a Better Way and now Time for a Change.

The network is hosted by [Civil Exchange](#), and is co-ordinated by Caroline Slocock and Steve Wyler, with Laura Seebohm as Convenor for the North of England. We work in partnership with [Carnegie UK Trust](#) and we are also supported by the [Esmée Fairbairn Foundation](#), the [John Ellerman Foundation](#) and, in 2021, [Power to Change](#).

You can find out more, and also contact us and indeed join us, via our [website](#). And please follow us on Twitter [@betterwaynetwrk](#).

### ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

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# WE SIMPLY CANNOT GO ON AS WE ARE

**But if we change the way we work, together we can build a fairer society in which everyone can enjoy a good life.**

The Covid-19 crisis has shown, if it wasn't obvious already, that some things in this country are in a sorry state, and have been for a long time:

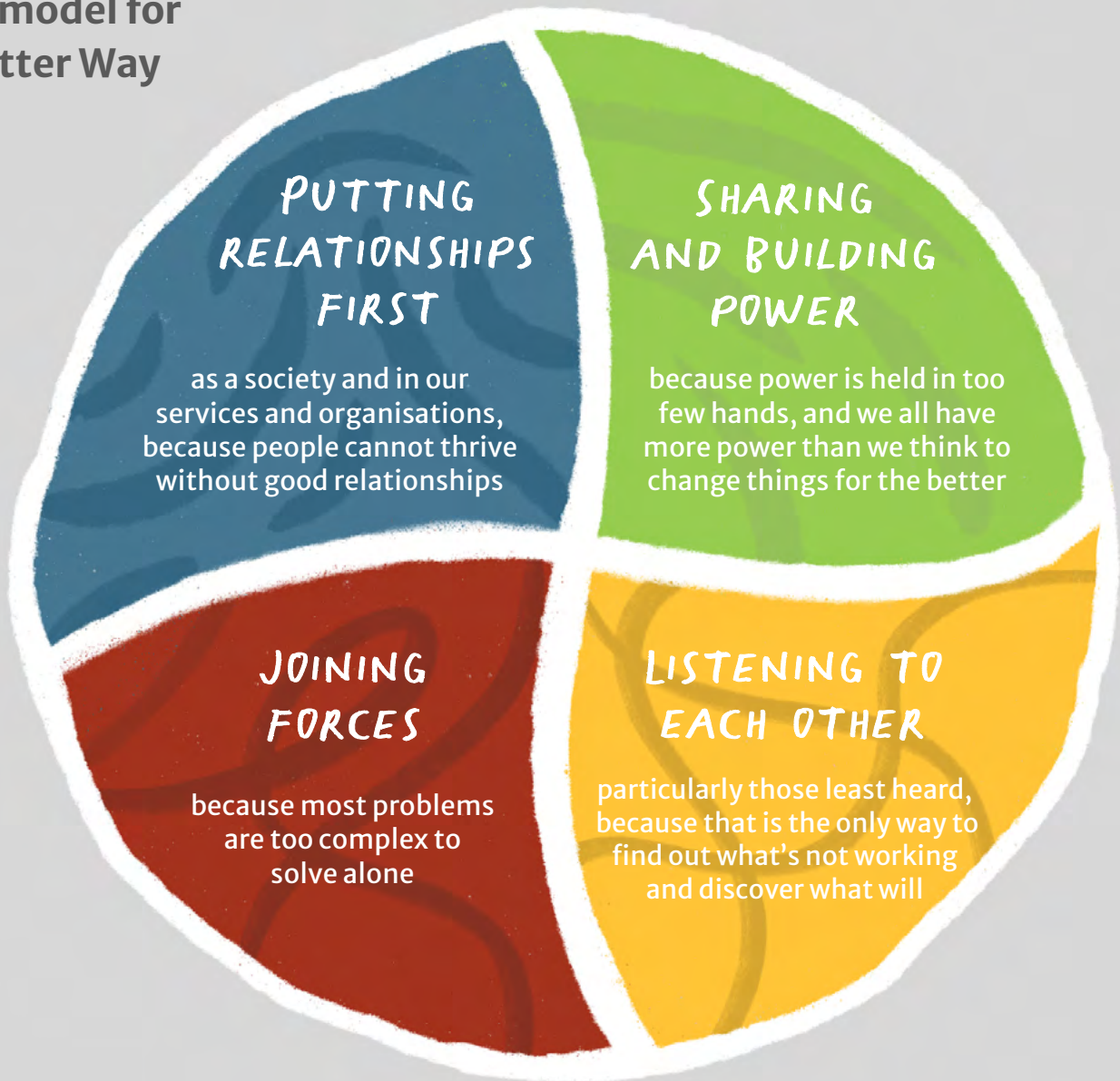
- We live in an 'us and them' society, where other people are seen as the problem.
- Deep-seated inequalities and injustices continue, but are swept under the carpet.
- Too many people and places are ignored and left behind, and it is they who are suffering most in the pandemic.
- When people need help in their lives, services and systems too often let them down.
- From food poverty to climate change, we address things only when they're in crisis.

There are of course also things that are right about this country and many people are already working to change what's wrong, and we can learn from them. The crisis has also shown glimpses of a kinder, more collaborative society, where connection and community flourish and where organisations on the ground work well together.

But the risk is that the old way of doing things will reassert itself after the crisis ends and in the fall out existing inequalities will only get worse. The opportunity for something better will pass. And our individual efforts to put the [principles](#) of a Better Way into action will not be enough to achieve the fundamental change that will deliver a fairer society.

Over 2020, our network has been building on our [2019 Call to Action for a Better Way](#), working together to identify how we can deliver the change we want to see. This has shown that it is not only what we do, but also how, and four things have shone through, which we have brought together in our model for a Better Way, as shown here and explored in the following pages.

## Our model for a Better Way



Any of these can be the starting point, but doing them together will make each more effective. This is a journey of discovery without pre-determined outcomes: we travel with others hopefully, trusting others to help us achieve a better result.

In a Better Way, that is what we do: joining forces within and across sectors, learning and sharing, but also working together on common

problems; listening to each other and identifying better ways to listen to others; sharing our own power and building new alliances; forging relationships between ourselves and finding ways to do this more widely.

This rallying call is aimed at anyone who may find inspiration in these four things, not just those who choose to join our network. But if you'd like to [join us](#), please do.

PUTTING  
RELATIONSHIPS  
FIRST



# WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

People cannot thrive without good relationships, so we need to put them first – in our society, services and organisations – not treat them as an afterthought.

Over the last year, we've learnt three key things:

## **1. Designing relationships in, not out, generates 'relational power'**

Where there are good relationships, communities and society pull together and individuals flourish, potential is unlocked and problems are forestalled or shared. Building kindness and humanity into our services and public life, and creating connection and community, not just passive services, can build 'relational power' and help people thrive, not just cope. But they have to be *designed in*, not out.

## **2. Our humanity is the most powerful change agent**

People not organisations build relationships, and behaviour is more important than processes or rules in encouraging good relationships to flourish. If we used the full range of our experience, rather than simply thinking with our professional hats on, the shift could be enormous – for example, thinking about recipients of services as 'our loved ones' changes how we think about those services. As we build relationships, it's vital that these are inclusive, not exclusive, and sensitive to differences, for example of race, religion, gender and sexuality.

## **3. We need to stop talking about people as problems, and see them as solutions**

Our national conversation disempowers and polarises, portraying people as problems to be fixed, blaming individuals for their own misfortunes or presenting issues as intractable. As a consequence, we walk away from problems, rather than working together to solve them, and see processes not relationships as the best response.

# WHAT CAN WE DO?

Here are some things we've identified that everyone can do – service providers, charities, central and local government and public agencies, private companies and funders too, and we'll be exploring further how to do these things well, as well as investigating new ideas:

## Designing relationships in, not out

- Make relationship-building the purpose of our work, with everyone in an organisation seeing relationship-building as core to the job they do.
- Direct resources to relationship-building activities, and measure this, not outputs.
- Invest in relationship-building capacity through *social infrastructure*, including the social connecting role of community hubs, community organisers and others, as set out [here](#).

## Unlocking our humanity

- Turn organisations into communities, not machines. If organisations focus on internal relationship building, they can unlock creativity, and give front-line staff opportunity to build relationships externally too.
- Replace the 'rational lexicon' of targets and standardisation with a '[relational lexicon](#)', which could create the conditions for positive relationships to flourish everywhere and show the principles and behaviours to get there.
- Make systems more relational. Tick box exercises are unhelpful but checklists, encouraging open questions and allowing space for reflection, can work.

## Seeing people as the solution, not the problem


- Stop the language of 'them and us' and start talking about mutual support, where we care for, depend on and learn from each other.
- Act more as enablers, seeing people not as 'consumers' or 'beneficiaries' or 'vulnerable' but as citizens who help create the changes they need and can often lead the way, and present those we help as having agency and potential, rather than as problems.
- Encourage authentic voices and new narratives in which people are portrayed not as passive recipients of support but as heroes of their own stories.



“WHAT IF A LOCAL AUTHORITY  
PUT MORE ENERGY INTO  
HELPING FAMILIES TO SUPPORT  
EACH OTHER IN TRUE, SYMBIOTIC,  
LOCALLY BASED RELATIONSHIPS?  
THEN THE PROFESSIONAL'S JOB  
WOULD BE TO SUPPORT THEM  
TO HELP EACH OTHER”

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– Becca Dove  
Head of Early Help Family Support  
Camden Council

A hand holding a glowing green orb with text inside, surrounded by tree branches. The background is a vibrant green with diagonal brushstrokes. The text is written in a white, hand-drawn font.

SHARING  
AND BUILDING  
POWER

# WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

Too much power *over* people is hoarded in government, institutions and the wealthy – whether it be money, assets, data, knowledge, influence or control – and we need to share it. But people who feel powerless often have more power than they realise – for example, personal agency, collective power, and the power of imagination and belief in a better world. There is much that we can do to build power *with* people.

Over the last year, we've learnt three key things:

## **1. Sharing power requires awareness and new tools**

Each of us can play a part, by understanding the sources of power and privilege, including our own, and identifying the blockages that prevent power from being shared.

## **2. Authentic voices can challenge existing sources of power**

Authentic voices stemming from personal experience can challenge existing sources of power, if they are not used in a tokenistic way. Storytelling 'from the heart' can be powerful.

## **3. Connecting people creates power**

Connecting people – for example, through networks, coalitions and activities that link people together – creates new forms of power. Communities themselves also generate power, sometimes out of negative experiences, as Covid-19 has shown.

# WHAT CAN WE DO?

Here are some things we've identified that everyone can do – service providers, charities, central and local government and public agencies, private companies and funders too, and we'll be exploring further how to do these things well, as well as investigating new ideas:

## Tools to share power

- Decentralise power according to the principle of subsidiarity, with more power given to communities whilst also delivering system-wide change.
- Bring people in: institutions across all sectors, including funders and commissioners, can share power by bringing people from across society including those with lived experience into policy-making, planning and design, making space for reflective practice together.
- Analyse data about services and organisations to improve awareness of how power operates and build new frameworks of accountability to those served.
- Embrace a social purpose for businesses, so that they work for communities and a healthy planet, rather than damaging them – for example by becoming social enterprises, co-operatives and B-Corps, and by making impact investing the new normal.
- Ease bureaucracy and funding restrictions. Trust a little more, control a little less!

## Authentic voices to challenge power

- Support and encourage unheard voices and create platforms for them to be heard.
- Let people tell their own story, linking it to the need for wider systemic change.

## Connecting People

- Build communities of place and interest, creating more networks, coalitions, campaigns, community hubs and shared activities, with a key role for civil society and funders.
- Invest in participative democracy. At local government level, we need new structures to enable meaningful collaboration and participation with social partners and communities, with funding and teeth, along with investment to build the capacity to engage.
- Encourage shared assets that give communities power, for example through community ownership.
- Link up different institutions locally to build agency and power for the benefit of the whole community.

“THOSE WHO ARE NORMALLY  
ROUND THE POLICY TABLE  
DON'T KNOW THE NUANCES OF  
HOW THINGS ACTUALLY WORK  
IN PRACTICE AND THAT'S  
WHERE LIVED EXPERIENCE IS  
COMPLETELY INVALUABLE”

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– Whitney Iles  
CEO and Founder  
Project 507

The image features a vibrant yellow background with faint, overlapping circular patterns in a slightly darker shade of yellow. In the upper right corner, a hand is depicted in a dark brown color with white outlines, reaching downwards. In the lower left corner, another hand is shown in a lighter brown color with white outlines, reaching upwards. The two hands are positioned as if they are about to meet or are in the process of grasping each other. Centered between the two hands is the text "LISTENING TO EACH OTHER" in a white, uppercase, sans-serif font.

LISTENING TO  
EACH OTHER

# WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

Listening to each other, particularly those least heard now, is the only way we'll find out what's not working, discover what will, and take action in ways that address the root causes of injustice and exclusion.

Over the last year, we've learnt three things:

## **1. 'Radical listening' - which leads to radical change - is what matters**

There are many forms of listening, all of which may be useful, but radical listening specifically sets out to disrupt power imbalances, puts people first, not existing organisational structures or ways of doing things, and results in radical change.

## **2. Radical listening can be taught, but it also needs a shift in culture**

Individuals can be taught processes and skills but organisational culture and practices must change too. Trust matters: you have to value people, and give them time and space to say what they want, not what you want to hear, and they must trust you to act upon it. This can be uncomfortable, as with any process of real change.

## **3. Barriers to listening must be removed**

It's important that all voices are heard, not just the loudest, and opportunities are created that make everyone feel comfortable and able to say what they think. It helps if the people inside the organisation have experience of the lives of those they serve.

# WHAT CAN WE DO?

Here are some things we've identified that everyone can do – service providers, charities, central and local government and public agencies, private companies and funders too, and we'll be exploring further how to do these things well, as well as investigating new ideas:

## Committing to radical listening

- Move away from centrally-conceived plans and targets towards principles and values which have been created with those served.
- Carry out joint exercises using 'appreciative inquiry' techniques, where leaders from different organisations listen to those they serve, and work with them in a positive and motivating way to bring about changes.
- Place a responsibility on central and local government to listen, with a Community Empowerment Act similar to Scotland's. This would improve services and strengthen trust and legitimacy.

## Creating the conditions for radical listening

- Change how we lead, even when that's hard: it's not about knowing all the answers or finding the solutions for others, but creating an open-ended culture where others can participate.
- Give staff permission to listen: re-write job descriptions to include listening, and make time for it. Empower them to act on what they hear.
- Agree standards and introduce training to put radical listening into practice.

## Removing the barriers

- Recruit the right people. The people best placed to listen and to act on what they hear are most likely to come from the very communities the organisations serve.
- Create new spaces and opportunities. Incidental one-to-one communication is often the best way to find out what people really need. Group discussions where people in the group listen and respond to each other can also be valuable. Social events can help.
- Seek out the people who are not in the room and find ways to talk that work for them.
- Make online more accessible. In COVID-19, it has opened up wider conversations but there's still a digital divide that Government needs to tackle.



"IT'S NOT COMPLICATED, BUT IT IS DISCIPLINED. WE HAVE TO STOP PUTTING OURSELVES AT THE CENTRE AND CREATE SITUATIONS FOR PEOPLE TO EXPRESS THEIR MOTIVATIONS AND DESIRES AND FIND THEIR OWN SOLUTIONS"

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– Karin Woodley  
CEO  
Cambridge House

# JOINING FORCES



# WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

Most problems are too complex to solve on one's own: 'if you want to go fast go alone, if you want to go far, go together'. Over the last year, we've learnt three key things that make collaborative work successful:

## **1. Collaboration requires a shared purpose that focuses on beneficiaries**

True collaboration, unlike many partnerships, starts with a shared purpose which can only be built together and must be informed by the voices of beneficiaries. Within this shared purpose, roles and responsibilities need to be understood and respected, including who takes decisions on what, recognising decisions are best taken as close as possible to where they impact on people's lives. When the shared purpose focuses on beneficiaries, bureaucratic barriers and turf wars between organisations begin to fall away. And collaboration persists, even when individuals move on.

## **2. Systems leaders have a big role to play**

'Systems leaders' work beyond organisational self-interest and professional silos to fix systems that fail beneficiaries. And systems leaders are not found only at the top of organisations: once principles are agreed, front-line staff are best placed to lead the detailed design of changes, engaging with everyone involved.

## **3. Work on relationships, as they make collaborations work**

When organisations come together, the starting place is often unequal and mutual understanding is low. Trust and respect can be built through contact in informal shared spaces, where people 'take off their lanyards' and bring their personal as well as professional experiences to the conversation. This allows people to be honest about what's not working, to stop being defensive and be open to fresh approaches.

# WHAT CAN WE DO?

Here are some things we've identified that everyone can do – service providers, charities, central and local government and public agencies, private companies and funders too, and we'll be exploring further how to do these things well, as well as investigating new ideas:

## **Putting in place a shared understanding and purpose**

- Spend time developing a shared purpose, informed by beneficiaries, and involve all social partners, including at national level as we advocate [here](#).
- Make sure roles and responsibilities are clear, and are aligned to the purpose.
- Work on the shared language, metrics and systems that underpin successful collaboration.

## **Adopting systems leadership**

- Invest in systems leadership, including 'connecting organisations' and networks that can share learning and help build collective leadership.
- Build systems leadership into job descriptions, including in local and national government as well as across sectors, and for front line not just senior roles.
- Rewire funding, commissioning, procurement and governance practices to encourage collaboration, not competition.

## **Working on relationships**

- Make time for relationships right from the beginning and nurture them throughout.
- Create opportunities for people to come together, and consider co-location.
- Recognise the imbalances and inequalities that exist in collaborations and agree standards for behaviour that enable participation by all.

"WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND  
OUR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE  
ROLES IN THE 'ECO-SYSTEM' THAT  
SURROUNDS THE PEOPLE WE  
WORK WITH. WE CAN ALL DO  
MORE TOGETHER"

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– Kevin Franks  
CEO  
Youth Focus North East

# NOTES

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You can use this space to make notes for yourself. And if you have feedback or suggestions for us please do [get in touch](#).

- What is most useful for me in this document?
- Are there people I would like to share it with?
- Are there steps I could take myself?

## WHAT PEOPLE SAY ABOUT OUR NETWORK

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‘Making new allies, sense making, inspiration’

‘Properly trying to understand power sharing as a way to shift society’

‘An opportunity to get under the skin of many of the more difficult issues with a group of amazingly diverse and talented people’

‘The network holds a space for folk doing all kinds of things – from grass roots to government – to come together to contribute to its meetings in a coordinated and consolidated way’

‘Music for the heart, brain and soul’

‘A breadth of positions, experience and perspectives’

‘Being able to step back from the day to day – every time I engage it reminds me I need to do so much more’

‘Connections: emotional, to stop me feeling isolated and ‘work/voluntary wise’, to listen to the great ideas and people’

‘A starting point to act for what I and colleagues have been feeling for a long time’

‘A feeling of solidarity’

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If you'd like to join us, go to our [website](#).



## Our model for a Better Way

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“WE NEED TO BUILD  
THE BIGGER WE”

– Nick Gardham  
CEO  
Community Organisers