

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



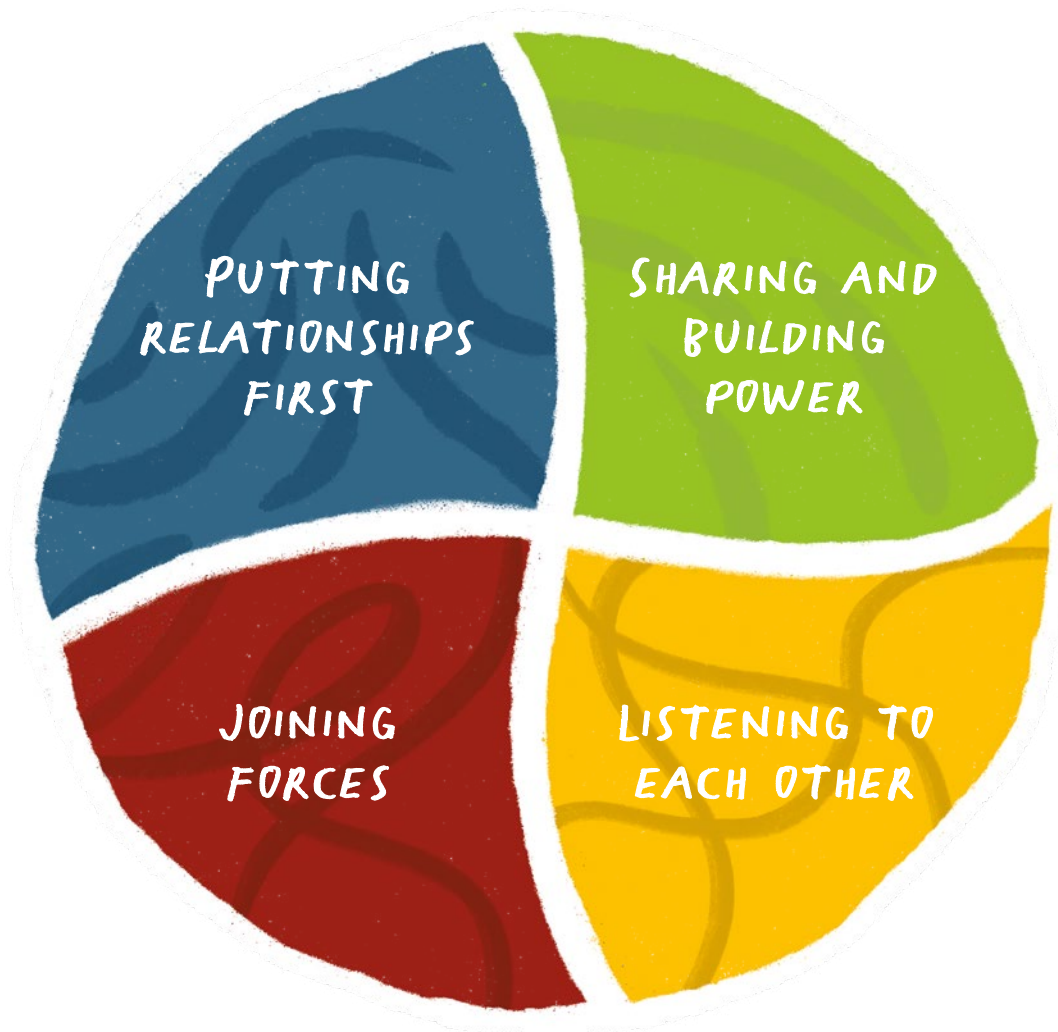
debate in the network over several years. While they have been refined more than once, they have stood the test of time. Everyone who responded to our recent survey said they like the principles (83 per cent saying 'very much').

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.