

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, hand-drawn font. The background is filled with light green, curved, brushstroke-like patterns that suggest foliage or a natural setting. The overall style is artistic 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.

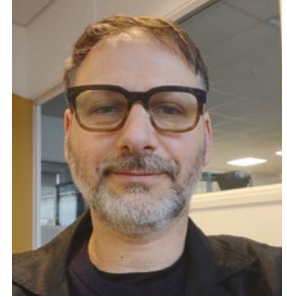
**O**pen – people appreciate openness and honesty, the good the bad and the warts too.

**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!**