

At a Tipping Point?

Building a Bigger We

At the beginning of 2022, we resolved to build a Bigger We, 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.

This is a transformation that needs to happen right across society, moving from a ‘them and us’ culture to one where we recognise our mutual interest in creating a world where everyone can thrive.

In a smaller way, we are also seeking to build a Bigger We through the Better Way network, sharing insights and ideas in our many discussions to make this way of working more widespread. And in February last year we published [Building a Bigger We](#), a collection of essays by our members which show what is already being achieved and which point towards the way ahead.

But we still have long way to go to make the Better Way the norm. We also know that people are feeling pressure from all sides, and some are experiencing burn out. By learning from and inspiring each other, as we do in our network, we can re-energise and 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.

Are we at a tipping point?

At our 2022 Annual Gathering, we took stock of the progress we are making, asking whether we are yet at a tipping point - discussing this in breakout groups, with additional reflections from Kathy Evans from Children England, Kristian Tomblin from NHS Devon Integrated Care Board and Sarah Hughes from the Centre for Mental Health. The conclusion was that we are making some progress but need to be more ambitious in pushing for change in the face of considerable challenges.

In some ways the tide is turning, we were told.

‘There’s a growing, collective feeling that there’s a need to do things differently.’

Relationship-based practice is taking hold, especially in the voluntary sector, and listening to people at the sharp end is becoming more widespread in local authorities and services, with politicians increasingly in the room. More people are calling for a shift to power, and national politicians across the parties are pursuing ideas for greater devolution and public participation. And there is more recognition in the public sector that civil society can deliver holistic support that can be transformative.

87 per cent of people at the Gathering also reported that the number of people who get a Better Way thinking in their field of work is rising, significantly more than the year before.

We've explored many great examples of such changes across the year, especially at local level. We are also seeing national institutions like the NHS seeking to form new partnerships with people and communities, for example through integrated care systems and, by the way, we are pleased that the NHS has reached out to the Better Way to ask us to help. There remains a commitment to Levelling Up nationally and some local authorities and others, with their communities, are already trying their best to make it happen despite the challenges.

And we've also heard from many public sector managers in our network that they are working hard to fundamentally shift away from the command-and-control mentality that remains widespread in our institutions, to share power, and to work with people and communities rather than imposing top-down solutions. They are finding imaginative ways to address needs, and to listen to rather than label people, resolving issues first time rather than passing people from pillar to post. There is no shortage of examples of people coming together, building a shared purpose, and doing the right thing - 'holding the hope' of a better way, whatever they are up against.

At the same time, some at our Gathering pointed out that previous talk of positive turning points had come to nothing, with the initial 'build back better' optimism inspired by the pandemic being an example. Some thought we may be at a negative tipping point, with systemic forces pulling in the opposite direction to the change we want to see. The stresses opening up in society as result of Covid-19, the Ukraine war and global warming are exacerbating deeper problems which may tip over into an even more destructive cycle before things get better. In the health and social care sector, for example, there's a sense of crisis and even despair. More widely instability, exhaustion and fractiousness has grown over the last year in response to multiple crises coming on top of existing deprivation and inequality, and this has eroded people's sense of solidarity and financial and personal security. Trust that our political and economic system will work is being lost and faith in leadership of all kinds is being eroded. Meanwhile, some politicians are fuelling a culture of 'them and us' where those who are different are portrayed as a threat, rather than seeking to find common cause.

'Holding the hope when hope is lost.'

History suggests that crises lead to change, positive or negative, and we need to work even harder to make this into a tipping point for good. What happens may be determined by larger forces beyond our control – and it is likely that not everything will go in the direction we want. Even if a downward spiral cannot be avoided at this moment, we will eventually still need to find a way to emerge from the rubble. And there is no doubt that the seeds of positive change are being seeded now, just as after World War Two the ideas and the movement that led to the creation of the welfare state had started long before the war began.

‘Every idea and discovery that changes the world begins with seeds planted over long stretches and is always marked by passages that look like abject failure.’

Gal Beckerman, *The Quiet Before*

There was a strong view that it’s all the more important that we communicate a wider, positive vision, stirring people to be hopeful and to imagine a different future, and build a grass roots movement to challenge institutional and political inertia. Networks play a very important role, as many of our members pointed out. We also heard about the importance of empathy and the power of story-telling to move not just minds but also hearts, and were encouraged to use it more. We should also challenge leaders of all kinds, including politicians, to be much bolder and more radical in their ambition for our country – for example, to be a world leader on the environment, refocusing our economy so that it serves the health and well-being of everyone, and refreshing our constitution and our politics so that as a country we listen to everyone, particularly those least heard; reach out to build deep relationships and join forces with partners (especially those with their feet on the ground); and share and build new sources of power.

Indeed, it was suggested that we need to cultivate a radically different kind of leadership if we are to seize whatever opportunities are available to bring about a better future, where we collaborate, co-create and commit to reconciliation and equity, showing the courage to take risks, fail and learn from it.

This type of thinking, like much else that we have been sharing in the Better Way, feels powerful, positive, and timely, and if we are truly at a tipping point, never more needed.

What we’ve learnt from our network in 2022

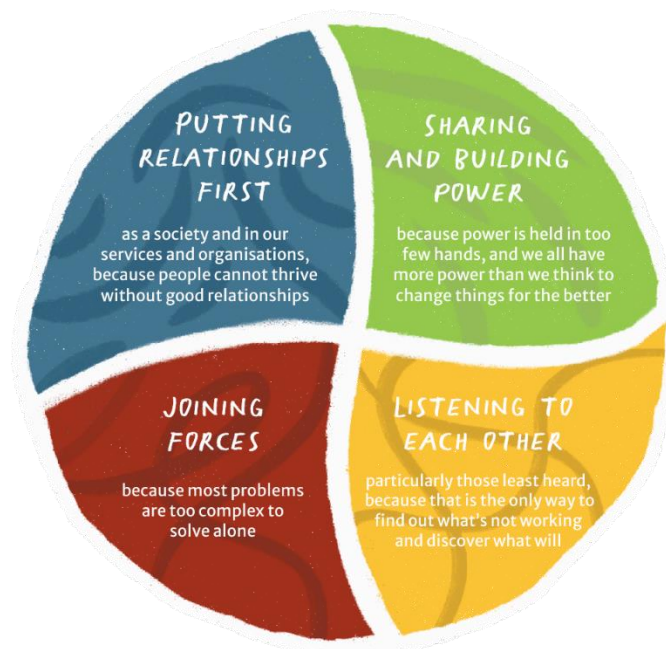
Over the year, we have attempting to lay the foundations for the Bigger We through over 40 online events, as well as many smaller meetings, trying to identify *how* to make positive change happen, and, taken together with our previous work, we now have a substantial body of practice and insight with which to build that wider movement. We share a few highlights below.

Our principles and behavioural model

Our guiding [principles](#) and [behavioural model](#) were developed through discussion in the network in previous years, and over 2022 we continued to deepen our understanding of them.



Our behavioural model



Our latest survey shows that 100 per cent of those responding like the Better Way principles, 79 per cent very much. And 97 per cent said they like the Better Way behaviour model, 70 per cent very much.

'They are clear and respond to the issues we face in creating a fairer, more sustainable and welcoming society for all.'

'They are simple to understand but hard for many to apply, which makes them powerful.'

'It is change from the inside which makes so much sense.'

'I approach my work through the lens of Relationships, Joining Forces, Radical Listening and Sharing Power - almost as a check list.'

We continued to hold ongoing cells looking at each of the four behaviours during 2022, as well as multiple meetings on some cross-cutting issues we agreed to explore further at the end of 2021. We also held a roundtable with the NHS on how they can work better with people and communities. Records of each meeting can be found [here](#).

Above all, we've learnt about the power of community, the value of a different kind of leadership, the potential of collective imagination and finding a way through division and trauma.

'No "them and us", only us.'

The power of community

Across the year, we've constantly returned to the issue of the power of people and communities, including in the context of Levelling Up, integrated health and care, [NHS England's new statutory guidance on working with communities](#) and Scotland's Community Empowerment Act, and deepened our collective understanding of its potential and how to make more of it happen.

We've heard that a shift in favour of more community power is needed, and that public and voluntary sector institutions can achieve far more if they re-set how they work with people and communities by applying the Better Way's behavioural model, in the following ways:

Putting relationships first

- [Map what's already out there in every community](#) and connect institutions and people to it.
- [Nurture the places - public, voluntary and private sector - where people meet](#) others who are different.

- Develop [models of mutual aid](#) where people build supportive relationships and through this can make the most of their talents.
- Give [front line staff the ability to relate to those they serve as people](#) and to help resolve their issues, whatever they may be, first time round.

Speaking at the Gathering and reflecting on the previous 12 months, David Robinson from the [Relationships Project](#) who has been our thought leader for this strand, spoke about the ‘deep tissue damage’ caused by Covid-19 but also how it had resulted in positive relationship building. The pendulum had swung back, but not fully. Two words that recurred again and again in our discussions, he said, were ‘trust’ and ‘risk’. Good relationships require trust but that can seem risky, and the challenge is how to build trust within communities so relationships can thrive. Done badly, it looks like the Big Society reheated, and in any case the state’s way of delivering is out of date and must become more relational. Relationship building has to happen within our own organisations and within partnerships too. To overcome resistance, he said, it’s important not to seek perfection, concluding:

‘It’s better to get the right behaviours wrong than the wrong behaviours right.’

Sharing and building power

- [Invest in communities’ capacity to engage](#) with the public sector in an equal relationship so they have the power to shape the things that matter to them.
- Use [citizens assemblies and participatory grant-making](#) to shape policy and funding.
- Avoid [co-opting mutual aid groups](#) and instead give [practical support to help them flourish](#).

Sarah Thomas from the [Sheila McKechnie Foundation](#) (SMK), who has been the thought leader for this strand along with Sue Tibballs, said at our Gathering that the discussions over the year had highlighted the many different approaches that existed. The power of community lies in numbers, access to resources and the building of solidarity around a shared vision. Building and sharing power is arguably separate from the other elements of the Better Way behavioural model, she thought, but is achieved through the other three – listening, joining forces and building relationships – and you have to look at these through the power lens to do it well. SMK had found through its own [work on power and solidarity](#) that it can be really hard, you need to seek out new people who may not agree and encourage funders to be supportive, and it is best to focus together on really tangible outcomes. She concluded by saying:

‘We need to move forward with humility, continuously reflecting and learning.’

Listening to each other

- Put [people's needs and stories](#), rather than institutional agendas, at the heart of service design.
- Take on people from the community as staff and volunteers, and develop the [cultural competence to reach out to all communities](#).
- Embrace [digital technology](#) when it would be a better way to engage with and listen to people and put them in charge of how it is used, where that makes sense.
- Introduce formal community empowerment structures or practices, [as in Scotland](#), but change institutional culture and behaviours too, as they can get in the way of listening.
- Establish [an active cycle of listen-act-listen](#) with those you serve and, if you can't act because change is needed more widely, engage with them in creative campaigning to bring this about.

Karin Woodley from Cambridge House has been our thought leader for this strand. Speaking at the Gathering, she said that part of the problem with how listening is usually practised is lack of inclusion and lived experience. Radical listening can help us dismantle existing structures, practices and cultures but we need to overcome the propensity to control, challenge our philanthropic DNA and deconstruct our saviour mentality to listen well. We need to embrace challenge from within our communities, not from above. There is a process around radical listening which takes time and requires space and new skills and experience. It's important to challenge the 'digital allergy' that comes from generational prejudices and think innovatively about the ways in which you can listen. Overall, she said:

'We need to be advocates, not service providers, and embrace challenge from within our communities.'

Joining forces

- Focus less on bringing people into committees and [more on creating spaces](#) within communities to explore together how to [redesign services](#) and level up.
- Build alliances in which partners recognise their [different strengths](#), start from a blank piece of paper (rather than someone's predetermined agenda) and go where the energy is.
- Invest in the [time, resources and relationships](#) to make it possible to really join forces.

Cate Newnes-Smith from Surrey Youth Focus, who has been our thought leader for this strand, also shared her thoughts on what we had learnt over the year. Like Sarah, she

saw a lot of overlap with the other elements of the behavioural model, especially the need to build relationships. True collaborations are rare, she thought, and involve a pooling of resources and approaches, and need to start from the bottom up, gaining a shared view of the problem before deciding on the solution. She was reminded of the saying, 'a commissioner's job is not to purchase services but to make sure communities have what they need'. It is easy to get sucked into building new boards, strategies and governance, especially when working with large bureaucracies: a danger of the Integrated Care Systems is that they 'build over' those in the voluntary and community sector, rather than joining forces with them. A key lesson is that:

'We need to build a coalition of the willing, with different perspectives, which is harder but better.'

We also heard from the breakout groups at the Gathering about how to build the power of community, with Becca Dove from Camden Council, Samantha Abram from the Brick in Wigan, Clare Wightman from Grapevine Coventry and Warwickshire and Lara Rufus-Fayemi from Newham Council also sharing their reflections with us. Key points included:

- We must work with people in a way that sparks an activist mindset, so they feel they have the power to become active participants in their communities. It starts with building trust through listening, responding and inspiring, not trying to 'fix', and certainly not labelling and demonising.
- Local democracy needs rebooting in a way that gives people agency, and we need to invest in the community sector to do this, building horizontal forms of community power and capacity as well as shifting institutional power and looking at new governance structures that support 'common power'.
- There are still huge swathes of society that are never heard and never included, so there is lots of work still to do to find out what messages are not being heard. Language can be a barrier and even the word 'power' can have negative connotations.
- Councils are set up to act, not to listen, and also do not always understand that trust takes time to build and is essential in order to involve local people in the decisions. This isn't always easy and means that you have to hear everything when you are listening not just what you hope to hear.
- What are public services for? Ultimately an expression of love and care, a 'commons' to pass on to people who will serve after them. Administrators come and go, the community remains. Services need to stop taking power away from those they serve

and learn from them in a way that is alert, reverent and life-giving, 'lifting' the power that communities already have.

'Power isn't ours to give, we lift it from those we serve... We need to reclaim the meaning of being in service to each other.'

The value of a different kind of leadership

We've heard that leaders can bring about transformative change if they:

- Behave less like a leader, more as an [enabler of leaders](#).
- [Practise more leadership and less management](#).
- See [strategy as a shared vision, not a set of targets](#), develop it with those served, and adjust it as you learn.
- Promote both [individual and collective well-being](#) in the ways they practice leadership.

Nick Sinclair from the Local Area Co-ordination and New Social Leader networks, who has been our thought leader for this strand, said that too often leadership and management were conflated. We need to think of leadership as facilitation, moving away from the current 'command and control' model where we are over-managed and under-led. Leaders should be guided by principles and behaviours and establish the right culture rather than a rigid workplan.

'We are over-managed and under-led and need to see leadership as the facilitation of change.'

The potential of collective imagination

We've heard that using our collective imagination to envisage the world we'd like to live in can be better than incremental changes to how things are now and learnt that we can:

- Give people permission to exercise their [imagination](#) and the tools to do so.
- Solve seemingly intractable problems like poverty by [imagining together](#) how to tackle the root causes and asking the question, 'what if?'

Phoebe Tickell from Moral Imaginations, who has been our thought leader on imagination, said that 'moral' imagination is powered by a sense of justice. She said that this is not about visioning a different future, as if it is separate to ourselves and our current world. The future doesn't exist, it is made by our present choices. However, the current system makes us feel a false sense of inevitability and powerlessness. We need to fight for a higher bar and reframe how we think about activism, which is often seen as simply being disruptive.

Concluding, she pointed to changes today which we now take for granted which, when they were first thought of were considered ridiculous:

'Imagination is the source of all change.'

Finding a way through division and trauma

We've heard that there's an urgent need to build 'bridging capital' between divided communities and address the trauma that some communities and first responders are feeling. We've learnt that we can:

- [Build bridges](#) by identifying common values, needs and activities in divided communities.
- [Help heal traumatised communities](#) by giving time and space for people to find a way through.

Neil Denton, a community mediator and Professor in practice at Durham University, who has been our thought leader for this strand, reflected that 'plague begets pogrom', with crises that at first bring people together often driving them apart. Covid has left a legacy of conflict and divisions. But conflict can be an energy for change, and 'righteous anger' is an important part of that. We can build bridges by connecting, listening, being willing to embrace both the light and the dark, identifying common need, finding resource, having the courage to give it a go, being open to evolution, finding support and developing learning, and managing competition and disagreement as a vehicle for growth. We need to invest more in building bridges between communities now, he said, likening this to flood defences:

'We don't need to build higher walls to keep the flood out, we need to go upstream, and tend the eco-system that prevents division.'

Participants at the Gathering had many rich reflections on what they heard and fed back from breakout groups. Olu Alake from the Peel Institute, Laura Seebom from the Maternal Mental Health Alliance and Venu Dhupa from the Westway Trust, also shared their thoughts. Key points included:

- There's a leader in each of us and we need to invest in the capacity of leadership, deploying imagination and tackling division and trauma at a time of depleting resources as a way of turning the current crises into a positive tipping point.
- In the most authentic version of real leadership, a leader is only created by others *voluntarily* feeling that they follow them.
- Healing needs time, and 'hatred is unheard pain'. When division happens, people become a number or are labelled, for example women complaining about poor treatment in the health service are often seen as 'mad, sad or bad'. Professionals can

become brutalised by trauma and we need to find ways for people to connect as humans and feel compassion for others.

- It's important to engage with people creatively. Art and creativity can allow new perspectives to breathe.

'I put most of my thought and effort on 'leadership' into being a good, overt, reflective and supportive follower of those whose ideas, actions and work inspire me.'

'You need to have the courage to give of yourself, while also exercising self-care.'

About the network

Our network is growing more rapidly than before – we now have 1,100 members, from the voluntary, public and private sectors, with 350 joining in 2022.

We believe that what makes us special is that we are cross-sectoral, values-based and relational, creating a space to connect people working at the grass roots, including those from small local charities, with voluntary and public sector leaders, to share ideas and inspiration, to make new connections and also to work with others to build momentum for wider change.

More people are now coming to the network from the public sector, and our geographical spread is widening too, with people joining in from right across the country.

Our members are taking our thinking back into their own work and vice versa, including through national initiatives like the [Relationships Project](#) and the [New Social Leaders](#) programme, and we are also spreading our learning more widely through social media, for example through our 2,000 plus twitter followers, and our publications - we had 1,600 visits to *Building a Bigger We* on our website and we had 40K twitter impressions when it was first publicised.

Our members say:

'Conversations have been mature, informative and current.'

'They are always very well run and very thoughtfully organised.'

'The events are both supportive and challenging, in a good way.'

'I've used the ideas to expand the way we work with others.'

'It would be so easy for the network to become an echo chamber, yet it doesn't and that is so valuable.'

'This network provides opportunity to share inspiration, contacts and hope.'

'We need this thinking space more than ever at the moment, so we don't drown in crisis misery!'

Our aims for 2023

Looking ahead, we plan to:

- Further grow and diversify the network, while continuing to offer a broad programme of events, grounded in our core Better Way principles and behaviours, which help network members share learning and insights.
- Seek to strengthen the network's voice to get the message across more widely and become a catalyst for change, by increasing its influence, impact and reach through our meetings, website, social media and blogs, and through new publications if funding allows, and further developing our communications.

Diversifying the network

There are two areas especially where we think we should focus our attention:

- Diversity is critical to our mission, and we will be taking on some specialist support to help us attract a more diverse membership, particularly but not exclusively in terms of ethnicity, and help us improve our data so we can monitor progress more effectively.
- We want to enrich the blend of public sector and small and local groups in our network by seeking to engage more national and local public sector leaders, which we know are relatively under-represented in a Better Way, at the same time as increasing the involvement, engagement and profile of people working locally and in small organisations. Working together we can achieve so much more.

Increasing our impact and reach

We discussed at our Annual Gathering about how our network can help to achieve systemic change in some key areas by joining up the dots of the amazing work already being done in our network, and we also discussed options for our meetings in 2023.

A theme throughout the Gathering was the need not just to focus on the urgent issues now, but also build for the long-term. Some wanted the network to focus on building resilience, sharing information and models of influence that help our members to facilitate local communities to get by in the economic emergency. Others also wanted us to explore how we can create deep systemic change in institutions and systems and suggested the network might also think about a Better Way manifesto for the next election – an idea we will take away.

In the light of the Gathering's input, these are our thoughts for where we might focus our efforts, though this will continue to evolve in the light of feedback and experience.

Just as in 2022 we largely focused on community power, so in 2023 we plan to explore some other broad themes. The first of these is *Health and well-being*, a topic relevant to all aspects of our mission - improving services, building community and creating a fairer society, and we are currently working with the NHS on this. We may link this topic more widely to the theme of prevention (which is one of our founding principles). We held an event on ending poverty in November 2022 and will explore this further, not least as a determinant of health. Another potential theme is *A Better Way democracy*, which relates to our Better Way principle that [*mass participation is better than centralised power*](#). We have already started to explore this in terms of citizen engagement and participation in grant-making in 2022 but there is more to do to understand how this could transform our democracy nationally and locally.

We will continue to hold a mix of recurring events, or cells, on particular themes - including the four Better Way behaviours and the other strands we have been exploring, leadership, healing division or trauma, and imagination - as well as to hold roundtables and regular drop ins. There was a particularly strong interest at our Gathering in the use of imagination.

Throughout, our focus will be mainly on the *how* rather than the *what*, looking at the principles, behaviours and practices that will achieve a Better Way, sharing examples and ideas to make them happen, but also continuing to ask questions about *why*, so that we continue to challenge ourselves, and take nothing for granted.

'We need to build an 'imagination infrastructure.'

But we also plan to run some sessions for people who are already working at the forefront of our thinking and want to challenge and develop it.

In all of this we will continue to be guided by our members. Summing up the Gathering in December 2022, Sufina Ahmad, of the John Ellerman Foundation, commented that the network was a place of evolution, and although it was right to focus on the how, we should also consider the question 'why'? We need to ask the tough questions and imagine new ways of achieving change. Amidst the grief, loss and fear and anxiety many people are feeling, we need to build resilience, well-being and hope, concluding:

'This network is a place of courage and kindness.'

Caroline Slocock and Steve Wyler, Co-convenors, A Better Way: www.betterway.network
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