**Sheila McKechnie Foundation**

**Organisation Review 2016 - 2019**

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[](http://i2.wp.com/belindapratten.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/cropped-favicon.png)

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**The SMK Word Cloud**

As part of this review, key stakeholders were asked what words they would choose to describe SMK, creating this word cloud:



**SMK Triennial Evaluation 2016 - 2019**

**Introduction**

In 2016 the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK) agreed a new, and in many ways ambitious, strategic framework for its work. The agreed new vision was "to ensure that individuals, groups and communities have the skills and confidence to take effective action on issues that matter to them" and this is underpinned by four key goals:

* That campaigning is recognised and supported as an essential part of civil society
* That campaigners – whether individuals, communities or organisations – have the knowledge, tools and support to succeed.
* That the campaign community comes together to strive for excellence and to celebrate success
* SMK is a high performing organisation driven by the desire to find the best ways to support campaigning excellence

This Triennial Evaluation reviews SMK’s performance against these goals, how far, and how effectively it has achieved the outcomes that underpin each of these; the impact of its work on key stakeholders (campaigners, policy-makers, funders); and on SMK itself. This report examines each of the strategic goals in turn and examines the extent to which they have been achieved and the difference they have made. It finds that what could have been expected to be a transitional phase for SMK has in fact been transformative.

Core to the new strategic framework was a recognition that SMK needed to deepen its knowledge and expertise and gain a much better understanding of how campaigning is recognised and supported. This aim was to strengthen the quality and value of its capacity-building support; to grow engagement and income from larger organisations; and in turn, increase impact. The Social Change Project (TSCP) aimed to do this, in collaboration with individuals, communities and organisations involved in campaigning and social change. As this report shows, this one project has been extremely successful. Not only has it enabled SMK to meet its four goals, it has also had a fundamental impact on the way it operates more generally, across all aspects of its work.

As a consequence, the SMK of 2019 is very different to that of 2016. Then, it was primarily a provider of campaign training, funded by charitable foundations to deliver this to individuals and/or organisations. Since then TSCP has given it a higher profile and reputation as a thought leader, while its policy work has strengthened its voice as an advocate for campaigning and the campaign community. It has also built up a rapidly growing consultancy service to individual organisations, using the tools and insights gained from TSCP, demonstrating the project’s on-going impact on the organisation’s intellectual and financial capacity.

As a reviewer, it has been an interesting exercise tracking and evaluating this journey and the impact it has had. SMK appears to be in a much stronger position now than it was three years ago, but how it builds on these foundations and consolidates its work in coming years will be crucial. Although it has undoubtedly made significant gains during this time, there are still concerns about its capacity and reach. In light of this, SMK is right to review and refresh its strategy and staffing structure now to determine where it wants to be in three or five years time and how it will get there.

**Methodology**

This evaluation is based on an analysis of documentary evidence supplied by SMK, this includes:

* administrative data for training events, masterclasses and other activities held by SMK from 2016-2019, (eg number of events / participants, size of organisation attending);
* individual monitoring and evaluation data from participants at these events (anonymised) and selected ‘campaigner stories’ from SMK alumni;
* data on the number of subscribers to SMK’s mailing list (May 2018 – January 2019); visitors to its website (July 2018 – February 2019); twitter and Facebook followers (2017 – 2019); and
* additional documentary evidence including a learning report from the first stage of the *Social Power* report, a list of public engagements for the period and reports to funders.

Additionally, 12 former SMK National Campaign Award-winners were contacted to ask if winning had made a difference to them, six responded, two were uncontactable (emails bounced back). Views were also sought from key stakeholders identified by and contacted through SMK. A further 12 semi-structured interviews were carried out with funders, associates and sector leaders.

Different stakeholders are more or less familiar with different aspects of SMK’s work, for example some had been more involved with the Social Change Project, others with training, and therefore each interview used the same framework but had a slightly different focus. In terms of content, this aspect of the research is more an appraisal than an evaluation, resting on opinion rather than evidence, but it does offer a rich understanding of SMK’s development in recent years. It should be noted that interviewees were not selected independently, and it could be that other stakeholders have a cooler regard for SMK, nevertheless while all were broadly supportive, interviewees were not uncritical.

Interviews were conducted under ‘Chatham House rules’, so all quotes used have been anonymised. It should be apparent in the text whether a quote has been used to summarise a point of view that has broad support, or because it is an outlier providing a particular perspective. Where there is more than one quote, these have been selected from different sources and indicate a strength of feeling on a particular point.

**Progress against goals and objectives**

**1.That campaigning is recognised and supported as an essential part of civil society**.

* ***There is a clearer and shared understanding of what campaigning is, and what constitutes legitimate campaigning activity, among all stakeholders***.
* ***There is a more robust on-going exploration of how different stakeholders can and should support effective campaigning – from government, to funders and organisations themselves***
* ***The campaign community has a more powerful voice in advocating it’s point of view***

*Campaigning as a legitimate activity*

Since 2016 SMK has sought to provide a more active voice for campaigners and the campaign sector. In so doing it has increased its profile and influence both within the wider voluntary sector and with senior decision-makers and opinion-formers. Its work on the Lobbying Act, for example, has not only drawn attention to the ‘chilling’ constraints on civil society voices, but also helped to promote a better understanding of what constitutes legitimate campaigning activity.

The annual SMK Campaigner Survey introduced in 2016 has provided a foundation for SMK’s advocacy work, giving it a legitimacy both within the campaign sector and more widely. 100 campaigners responded to the first survey, increasing to 150 respondents in 2017. This was a significant increase and one that has been sustained in subsequent years. As well as reflecting the survey’s increased profile, this also highlights people’s concerns about their ability to campaign in the current climate: 90% of people taking part in the 2017 survey were concerned about the negative impact of restrictive government measures on campaigning and campaign organisations.

SMK’s subsequent report, The Chilling Reality (May 2018), provided the evidence needed to demonstrate the detrimental impact of the Lobbying Act and make the case for a more positive, enabling environment for charities and others. SMK has since played a leading role in the ‘Lobbying Act Group’, alongside organisations such as the Quakers and others in the sector to achieve change. More recently it has undertaken confidential research on the impact of ‘gagging clauses’ in government grant contracts, helping it to build on and cement its reputation as a thought leader and advocate.

This evidence-base has given SMK’s work much credibility, helping it to make a stronger case for campaigning through articles, blogs and interviews, including in mainstream media (in November 2018 Sue was interviewed about ‘gagging clauses’ on Radio 4’s Today programme). The research has also been welcomed and used by others wanting to speak out against Government restrictions. One interviewee described The Chilling Reality as

‘… an effective, timely and punchy report, which we could use to poke at government. Its clear they [SMK] were asking the right questions. It was thorough, it made substantive points… it gave us real evidence, it wasn’t just a whinge.’

Although not all interviewees agreed what should happen about the Lobbying Act, - i.e. there isn't a consensus as to policy - the research was said to be of a high standard that provided invaluable evidence and helped organisations ‘sharpen our own arguments’ and strengthen their influencing work.

Influencing policy-makers

SMK’s policy work has drawn attention to the need to secure a more enabling environment for campaigning. Over the period under review it has built relationships with Government Ministers and advisors, senior members of the Opposition Front Bench, the Charity Commission and the Electoral Commission. Using its research on the impact of the Lobbying Act and gagging clauses it has made the case for change, with some success. For example:

* although the Lobbying Act remains unchanged, the Government’s Civil Society Strategy (2018) explicitly refers to The Chilling Reality report before affirming civil society’s right to speak out:

‘*The government is determined that charities and social enterprises should be fully confident in their right to speak in public debates, and to have a strong campaigning and advocacy role.’* (2018 p.20);

* The report was extensively reference in a House of Lords debate on the subject (September 2018).
* The Labour Party’s Civil Society Strategy (2019) is committed to repealing the Lobbying Act; and
* the Electoral Commission is to produce new guidance for charities on the Lobbying Act (forthcoming).

Although it is not possible to attribute these last two developments directly to SMK, its work has undoubtedly contributed to them. This suggests that SMK has had a positive impact on the policy environment, giving the campaign community a more powerful voice both through its own advocacy and by sharing the evidence to enable others to make their own case.

‘A powerful voice’

Interviewees identified the absence of and need for a strong, powerful voice for campaigning in civil society in the current climate. All recognise that the voluntary and community sector faces huge challenges: campaigning is seen by many as too risky or too difficult to do, while mainstream infrastructure organisations ‘are not as effective in this space as they could or should be’. Against this background, SMK’s willingness to say what it thinks and its passion for campaigning and progressive social change makes it an effective, leading (and sometimes dissenting) voice within the sector. It is said to keep mainstream organisations ‘on their toes’ and embolden others to speak out. It is also fairly unique in that it supports individuals as well as organisations:

‘It actively engages and goes beyond the formal civil society sector, embracing the ‘accidental’ campaigners out there’

‘It has a different spirit and approach, nurturing and supporting individuals with the passion and desire for social change’.

‘It still has that link with Sheila herself, that passion for campaigning and changing the world and it utilises that.’

Opportunity or threat?

Although interviewees were generally positive about SMK’s work in this area, some interviewees offered a word of caution, suggesting that too great a focus on threats to campaigning could be counter-productive:

‘Its like with myth-busting, people remember the myths but not the facts. Highlighting the risks just makes campaigning seem more risky.’

‘There needs to be less focusing on what people can’t do and more on the role campaigning can play, pushing that to the limits.’

‘SMK has done good work on the Lobbying Act, but I have a concern that this all becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. They need to pivot a bit, get more confident and push the boundaries, demonstrate the value of collective voluntary sector action.’

In summary, SMK’s work on the Lobbying Act and other restrictions on campaigning has been influential, providing a credible evidence-base for SMK and others. It has also enhanced its reputation as a thought leader both within the sector and with policy-makers and opinion-formers. While some stakeholders have raised valid concerns about focusing too much on the negatives, SMK’s other major piece of work in this period (The Social Change Project – TSCP) provides a positive narrative of social power and social change.

**2. That campaigners – whether individuals, communities or organisations – have the knowledge, tools and support to succeed.**

* ***There is more exploration of how social change happens and of the contribution campaigning makes to this that informs SMK’s approach and support***
* ***That SMK offers a broader suite of support to help campaigners, including to those who are marginalised and/or disadvantaged***
* ***That SMK is recognised as market leader in a growing marketplace for campaign training and support***

*The Social Change Project*

The most significant project undertaken by SMK in this period has been The Social Change Project (TSCP). This project has not only helped to build a better understanding of, and shared language for social change and social change-makers, it has also transformed the way in which SMK works and stimulated debate and action across the wider sector.

TSCP began in January 2017 and sought to learn about how social change is happening today and how this can be strengthened. The project worked with practitioners, funders and others to develop a shared understanding of social change, one that is very much grounded in practice.[[1]](#footnote-1) Over a period of 18 months it engaged with approximately 400 people through a combination of meetings, workshops and one to one discussions, ‘co-creating’ the findings and conclusions with those involved.

Those interviewed as part of this evaluation praised the way SMK ‘wrestled with and delivered this massively complex process’ and how much was learned on the way:

‘It’s a very strong project, particularly the way they involved other people in it …It was very impressive, they started with things that seemed fixed, but this changed in response to the discussions and engagement.’

‘It was a very good two-way process.’

‘I got quite worried at one point, it became so amorphous, it was hard to work out its core shape and rationale, but I really like the end product.’

The process of working with practitioners and others helped to identify a shared language and terminology to frame and talk about social change. Again, interviewees saw this as a journey and were impressed with the direction of travel, from ‘campaigning’ to ‘social change’ to ‘social power’. The final report was praised for:

* including those who may not see themselves as campaigners, as well as those who do, and those who want to protect or defend things, as well as those seeking change; and
* giving greater emphasis to the power and agency of civil society itself, the ability of individuals and organisations to make a difference (and correspondingly less to the role of government).

The TSCP appears to have taken the debate to another level, moving beyond charity campaigning to provide a broader focus on social change and social power. This has influenced how parts of the sector understand what campaigning is and what constitutes legitimate campaigning activity. As Matthew Downie, Director of Policy & External Affairs at Crisis told SMK:

*‘The SMK Social Power report has begun a much-needed process of re-imagining what is needed to achieve positive change in 21st century Britain. Much has changed since many of the ‘campaigning guides’ were written by the voluntary sector. Civil society and the political class are facing intensity of scrutiny, saturation of opinion via social media, and seemingly intractable social problems such as poverty, homelessness and climate chaos. Into this arena, the Social Power report has injected fresh thinking. It tells us that it is not enough to consider campaigning as a simple transaction between lobbyists and politicians, and crucially for me, has shone a light on the need for emotional intelligence and relationship-based campaigning.’*

A conservative estimate suggests that at least 1000 copies of the final TSCP report have been distributed, either online (it is available on the SMK website) or as hard copies. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the report and tools have been more widely shared, for example discussed in conferences and classrooms or through links on other websites. This makes it difficult to track its influence or impact, but this ‘snowball effect’ suggests it is likely to be much greater than anticipated.

Using the tools

‘Bite-size’ versions of the TSCP tools are available on-line and there appears to be a demand for these. For example, between October 2018 and April 2019, 158 people downloaded the Social Change Grid, and 152 people the ’12 Habits’: an average of 25 a month. Again, there may be scope to build on this, using digital tools to expand SMK’s offer beyond face-to-face training.

SMK has received positive feedback, particularly for the Social Change Grid. It has been used by a range of organisations for different purposes, for example by funders to help them review their grants; senior managers to review their organisation’s strategy and approach to social change; campaigners to help them plan their campaigns; and coalitions to help them map the contribution of different partners across the grid. Examples of organisations that SMK know have used the Social Change Grid and other TSCP tools in their work include:

* The Royal College of Nursing
* The Wildlife Trusts
* The Brooke
* Which?
* Amnesty
* British Chambers of Commerce
* Barnwood Trust
* New Philanthropy Capital
* Revolving Doors

These tools are said to be valued because they work at both a strategic and practical level, recognising that change can happen in different ways at different times. They go beyond traditional campaign planning models to help people think about social change in the round and consider how their organisation can make an impact and where best to target their activities.

Impact on funders

TSCP was funded by a consortium of charitable funders and SMK has sought to engage with them and others both during the project and since. The report’s findings, tools and recommendations have been presented to a number of charitable foundations, including Baring, Barrow Cadbury Trust, and the John Ellerman Foundation. The Baring Foundation has since used the Social Change Grid to review its own work and priorities and found it useful. Another funder interviewed for this evaluation agreed:

‘The Social Change Grid really resonated with our trustees, it gave them a tangible way of thinking about what campaigning and social change meant and how we can apply that to our grantees. It’s a hugely valuable intellectual tool, but its also quite practical – we discussed it in relation to projects that we fund and how they fit on the grid. Its been really helpful for us as non-specialists, it helps us visualise what we do in a very different way.’

Some funders have helped SMK disseminate the findings more widely. For example, Barrow Cadbury helped organise an event for independent funders; the Corra Foundation in Scotland invited SMK to run two workshops at its annual convention in Edinburgh. Again there is evidence that participants at these events have themselves gone on to share information and tools.

‘Social change’-based capacity building

SMK has taken what it has learned from TSCP and used this to transform its training offer and wider capacity-building work. According to its staff:

‘There has been a wholesale review of our training offer. We now use [TSCP] as a frame from the beginning. It really helps people to understand the process of social change, the language and to get people to really think about how change happens.’

This is borne out in interviews with SMK Associates. They too say that TSCP has had a positive impact, informing and refreshing both the training programme itself and the materials and tools it draws on. Analysis of feedback forms from trainees also finds that specific tools, such as the Social Change Grid, have been cited by some as the ‘most useful’ element of their training.

Consultancy

TSCP has increased SMK’s profile and reputation as experts in campaigning and social change, making it a recognised market leader in an increasingly crowded marketplace for campaign training and support. This is demonstrated by a significant increase in demand for consultancy over the last three years:

* in 2016-17 SMK received five enquiries about possible consultancy support;
* in 2018-19 it earned £25,000 in consultancy fees;
* in the first half of 2019-2020 it has already earned £50,000

This may be because the ‘TSCP model’ goes beyond campaign planning in a traditional sense (lobbying policy-makers). It takes a much more strategic approach to change and how to embed this in the culture of an organisation. For example, SMK is working in-depth with one major national civil society organisation to develop their strategy around campaigning and social power, which has led to giving presentations to the Senior Management Team and staff at the organisation’s Head Office. It is now providing training to regional staff teams.

The TSCP’s emphasis on change as a systemic process, influenced by how people think and behave (the ‘12 habits’) perhaps lends itself to a bespoke approach. Although the tools are generic, how they are applied will be specific to each organisation. The rise in requests demonstrates that there is a demand for this. In future there may be scope to tailor this further for discrete audiences, such as youth campaigners, as well as organisations.

Training and events

In the period under review, SMK has been funded to run the five-day *Influencing Change* programme in London and the West Midlands (as well as in East Africa and for those working on gender equality), and one-day campaign workshops (Introduction to Campaigning and Social Change) across the country. At the same time it has sought to expand the range of training, support and consultancy it offers to encompass ‘those just starting out’ and ‘seasoned professionals’, as well as those in between.[[2]](#footnote-2) It has done this by extending its offer to include more specialist Masterclasses in different aspects of campaigning (e.g. communication skills, using the law, and digital campaigning) and developing its consultancy service (see above).

A growing number of people participating in training events are from bigger and more established organisations, although not exclusively so. Analysis of Masterclass attendees, for example, suggest that these are attracting more people from larger organisations. It is also evident that when a particular session has been run more than once, different individuals from the same organisation have sometimes taken part. Therefore, while it is difficult to assess, if participants have recommended it to their colleagues this does imply that the impact of each class has been positive.

*Grassroots campaigners*

SMK’s *Influencing Change* programme and one-day *Introduction to Campaigning & Social Change* workshops are funded to support grassroots campaigners. Although participants consistently rate the quality of this training highly, it has at times been difficult to assess its impact on specific campaigns. The 2016 evaluation of SMK training (*Influencing Change* and *See Change*) found that the success or otherwise of a particular campaign is contingent on a range of internal and external factors, not least timing.[[3]](#footnote-3) To understand the impact of training it is more useful to measure this in terms of the skills, confidence and knowledge of trainees and how they have applied their learning.

In response to this, the 2018 evaluation of *Influencing Change* sought to capture participants’ stories, and the story of their campaign. In these stories, which are available on the SMK website, individuals are able to identify specific skills, tools and techniques they have gained from their training and say how they have put this into practice. For example:

‘I was able to understand how to constructively target people, use the right words to attract attention and not drag a conversation too long. Now, if I meet someone new, I use the elevator pitch to describe our campaign. In 30 seconds, I can get our key message across.’

These stories are a useful and effective way of enabling SMK to demonstrate its impact, showing directly how individuals have benefited from training as well as providing useful feedback and learning for SMK and programme funders.

Increasing reach

Applications to take part in funded training is sometimes lower than anticipated, particularly for one-day workshops held outside of London. It is difficult to know if this is because of the way the training is being promoted; marketing reach; or simply a lack of interest. For the one-day workshops, SMK is exploring different models to reach this group, this includes:

* experimenting with different language and approaches in marketing
* partnering with the Directory of Social Change, an established training provider, who can provide administrative and marketing support

That said, SMK is having real success reaching grass roots campaigners through commissioned training via third party organisations. SMK is increasingly being asked to provide support for organisations who themselves are working with people at a community level which in turn is significantly extending SMK's reach. For example, SMK is currently providing support for Big Local areas via the Local Trust and community champions volunteering for Thrive LDN the pan-London mental health campaign.

Although it is too early to say what impact this has had, it has helped SMK to achieve a step-change in its reach into communities and to individual social change-makers, including those who are marginalised and/or disadvantaged. At the same time, SMK's consultancy work is extending the organisations' reach into much bigger and more complex organisations.

*Increasing Profile*

The TSCP report has been a springboard for SMK, positioning it as an expert in the field of social change (in its broadest sense). According to interviewees, SMK’s ability to ‘conceptualise and articulate how campaigning and social power works’ has ‘helped to reposition SMK in the sector, 'it feels more confident, more of a thought-leader’.

The use of blogs, speaking engagements and media articles have increased the visibility and accessibility of TSCP’s findings. Staff have also been invited to speak at a wide range of conferences and other engagements, including those organised by NAVCA, NPC Ignites, Newcastle CVS, Partnership for Young London and the E-Campaigners Forum. This gives a flavour of the diversity of organisations responding positively to the project and its findings.

In summary, it is difficult to underestimate the impact of TSCP on SMK’s work, its profile and reputation. It has helped to create a much clearer understanding of how social change happens and identified practical ways that will strengthen civil society’s efforts to achieve this. For SMK, it has transformed its capacity-building work, enabling it to offer a broader range of support to campaigners and change-makers, whether individuals, communities or organisations. There also appears to be an active and on-going interest in the project’s findings and tools from civil society actors, this can be seen in the demand for consultancy and speaking engagements and in the take-up of on-line tools. It has also been the direct catalyst for direct approaches by funders – from the Cornerstone Fund to bid (successfully) for a project exploring how civil society can share power with ‘experts by experience’, and from the Baring Foundation to run a programme of work on using the law for social change.

**3. That the campaign community comes together to strive for excellence and to celebrate success**

* ***That there are more active networks where campaigners can come together***
* ***There is more critical challenge and reflective practice among campaigners***
* ***Outstanding campaigns and campaigners are recognised and celebrated***

Celebrating campaigns and campaigners

The interview phase of this research coincided with the 2019 National Campaign Awards and in the interviews there was a real ‘buzz’ around this. The Awards are said to ‘positively champion campaigns’ and ‘celebrate what good looks like’, as well as being an ‘opportunity to celebrate campaigning in all its diversity’. As such they are ‘inspiring’ and ‘good for morale’. It was also suggested that the ceremony itself has improved in recent years:

‘The Awards were getting tired, but that’s really changed and they’ve raised the bar a long way, people really do want to come now.’

One person offered a note of caution, that the Awards could end up ‘preaching to the converted’, but even they thought it a ‘great way to bring the campaign community together’. It was also pointed out how few opportunities there are for campaigners to come together in this way, many are often working in isolation and may not even see themselves as campaigners. The strength of the Awards is that not only do they recognise and celebrate outstanding campaigns and campaigners, but that in doing so they create a real sense of there being a ‘campaign community’, at least on that one night.

This year, one of the winners described herself as an ‘accidental campaigner’, a phrase I heard repeated time and again in the post-ceremony ‘chat’ and in later interviews. It is also echoed in responses received from former winners. Although a small and self-selecting sample of those approached (6/12), respondents said that winning had really boosted their morale, if not making a significant difference to their campaign:

*‘I don't think it made a difference in terms of the campaign profile, or not that I could tell really. But it's certainly boosted me, and its been great to have the recognition.’*

*‘Winning the award was a big boost for* [us] *that came at a time when we really needed a boost. It is amazing to feel part of something much bigger than ourselves.*

*‘To be able to say I’m an award-winning activist … makes people take a double take. From dismissing my work to thinking “maybe there is something in this” - it gives me respect and credibility. Plus SMK is a respected campaign organisation so that helps hugely too in campaign circles.’*

*‘Winning the award was a big boost for the campaign on an emotional level, and has definitely helped us in terms of internal cohesion and pride. I think it also gives us a lot of cultural cachet to get this recognition. It’s also been lovely to be welcomed into the SMK family, we do feel like we are part of a wider group now.’*

Its also apparent that the association with Sheila herself still means something:

*‘* [Sheila McKechnie] *actually came to my community … in the 80s when I was a small kid to help us with our local housing campaigns and spoke to my parents… so personally it’s got a special place in my heart too.’*

One person said that although the award had meant a lot to him personally, as a volunteer campaigner, he was disappointed in what he sees as SMK’s subsequent the lack of interest in, or support for his campaign:

*‘…the SMK Foundation has showed no interest in my campaign after I received the award. In this regard, I feel the SMK Foundation is really missing an opportunity to (a) amplify its mission’s message, (b) exploit its large base of award “alumni” and (c) maximise (collaterally, anyway) the existential value the SMK Foundation does provide to volunteer campaigners.’*

The decision to refresh and rebrand the awards in 2017 appears to have paid off, with attendees suggesting that the 2019 event was the ‘best ever’. Certainly the aim of celebrating success, and building a sense of community has been achieved and award-winners suggest that it has had a positive impact on them personally. For some it is an invitation to become part of the community, although SMK might want to consider how it builds an on-going relationship with the winners and their campaigns.

*Building more active networks*

SMK’s work over the last three years has brought it into contact with the ‘campaign community’ in its broadest sense. In addition to the 400-strong ‘community of practice’ who engaged with the TSCP, it has a subscriber-base of over 2,000 (even post-GDPR).

In 2018, SMK launched the Change Network to bring together campaigners and others working in the field of social change to learn from successful campaigns and share ideas and experiences. It has held four events to date, each one highlighting a significant campaign such as the fight for equal marriage and the Irish referendum on abortion. These events have generated significant interest, with over 100 enquiries for each, but with only about one third of these attending the events (which are also available on podcast). This appears to be a lack of time, rather than interest, a perennial problem that was highlighted in the 2011 evaluation: people saying they want to be actively engaged in networks (then Campaign Central), but not able to take the time to do so.

This is a challenging goal, and this should not be underestimated. Digital technology, such as podcasts, increases a network’s reach, but does not invite active engagement. Nevertheless SMK has made a good start here and recognises that there is further to go to achieve this objective and invite more critical challenge and reflective practice among campaigners. It is considering developing Action Learning Sets as a way of doing this. Again this is in response to feedback from practitioners.

**4. SMK is a high performing organisation driven by the desire to find the best ways to support campaigning excellence.**

* ***SMK has the resources it needs to deliver its Vision & Mission***
* ***SMK enjoys a high profile and strong reputation with key stakeholders***

Resources

SMK is said to achieve a lot with relatively little, but its size and therefore its sustainability were recurring themes in the interviews. Partly this is because it appears to be overly reliant on key individuals: Sue and her team are highly regarded, but there is a lack of confidence in the organisation’s future if Sue were to leave. It has to be said the same concerns about the pivotal role of the then Chief Executive were made in the 2011 evaluation.

Some stakeholders commented on a ‘lack of basic capacity’: information not forthcoming, emails not being responded to promptly, no feedback or follow-up from events or meetings (‘not even a thank you’). The individuals that raised this stressed they were not concerned for themselves, rather they saw it as indicative of an underlying organisational weakness:

‘It’s a small team and sometimes it can feel very stretched, you have to chase them for information – they always seem to pull it off but sometimes it seems they’re just skimming on the edge. … My concern is that everything is so tight that I don’t see how things can be delivered without working all hours. There is no spare capacity.’

A stronger organisational infrastructure would give it greater heft, enhance its ability to engage with others and help to keep things running smoothly, rather than just ‘skimming on the edge’.

SMK has always been a lean organisation and this has been a particularly difficult period. At one time there were only two permanent members of staff, and this may explain these comments. However, because it has been so successful in building its profile and reputation as a thought leader and capacity-builder it is now in a position to move onto a more sustainable footing. Already in 2019 it has:

* been successful in applying for core funding for its thought leadership and advocacy work;
* brought in £120,000 worth of consultancy and commissioned training work.

As a result, three new members of staff have been recruited. This means that the CEO is now leading a team of seven members of staff and this may increase further with the addition of a new training manager and policy assistant.

This highlights the less tangible impacts of TSCP on SMK, increasing its intellectual and financial capacity. It is already on the way to recouping much of the initial investment of £170,000 in commissioned work alone.

Associates and alumni are a potential resource for the charity, increasing its reach and helping it to deliver its vision and mission, there is scope for exploring how this resource could be utilised more effectively. One of SMK’s objectives for 2016-17 was to ‘bring its associates together to share knowledge and ideas…’. Sue was praised for doing this when she first came into post, demonstrating a desire to get a better understanding of their skills and expectations. However, there appears to be some uncertainty about how it will build on this. SMK is committed to bring in specific expertise (eg in relation to digital campaigning or community organising) to enable it to increase the breadth and depth of support it offers. This may perhaps need to be communicated more clearly to associates.

Asked if SMK did not exist, would they want to invent it, interviewees were more equivocal: most felt that the role is more important than the organisation. SMK does this role well, and is very well-respected by those who are familiar with its work, but they question whether it has the reach and capacity to sustain and develop this role or increase its impact:

‘It has a very important role but limited reach – I’m not sure how widely people know about it, even within the campaigning community.’

**4.5 *SMK can demonstrate its impact and success***

This evaluation has shown that SMK is a learning organisation. Its success rests as much on its approach as the outcomes it has achieved: its not just what it does, it’s the way that it does it. Arguably TSCP was more effective because of the way it was ‘co-created’ with practitioners and others. Both phases of the project benefited greatly from their input, from identifying the ‘burning issues’ at the start to testing out conclusions and recommendations in the second phase. This commitment to learning can also be seen in the way that it has responded to findings from previous evaluations, and used these to enhance its impact and improve how it measures success.

*Impact and training*

SMK has an established procedure for monitoring and evaluating all training programmes and events. For example, participants in *Influencing Change* are asked for feedback on the day and again 20 weeks after the end of the course, although the number of respondents is much lower at this point. This seems to work well, although a five-point Likert scale (rather than four) might be a more sensitive tool. SMK also regularly commissions external evaluations, including an evaluation of both *See Change* and *Influencing Change* programmes in 2016 and a more in-depth qualitative evaluation of *Influencing Change* in 2018.

Analysis of both external findings and internal monitoring and feedback, reveals a remarkable consistency in participants’ views, both in terms of the quality of the training and their satisfaction with it. Participants consistently rate SMK training and events as ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’. Although individuals may give specific aspects of the course a higher or lower rating, comments suggest this reflects their particular needs and interests, and does not stop them giving the event a high rating overall.

Independent evaluations of SMK’s training programmes suggested that campaigners’ skills and confidence are a better measure of the success of these programmes than counting ‘campaign wins’ – not least because the latter is contingent on too many other factors. The 2018 evaluation also made a number of recommendations as to how the offer could be improved, with priority given to:

* Creating a community
* Developing a digital offer
* Targeting grassroots campaigners
* Embedding and understanding impact

As noted above, SMK has since changed the way that it targets grassroots campaigners, working through other organisations, and is looking at how it might develop its digital offer. Feedback from Influencing Change participants suggest that they value the informal networking that it provides, SMK has since built in opportunities for them to formally meet up after the course to share experiences and progress and helping to create more of a sense of community.

This is the third evaluation I have carried out for SMK, having previously undertaken the 2011 Biennial Review (with Rosie Chapman) and the 2016 evaluation of training programmes. In my experience SMK is interested in feedback not only to demonstrate success, but also to help it calibrate and improve its offer, a tool to enable it deliver more impact. This means that the learning from Influencing Change is likely to be taken forward in subsequent training programmes, in the same way that lessons from TSCP have reshaped SMK’s approach to training.

Impact and advocacy

SMK has begun to examine how it can better assess the impact of its advocacy, for example by keeping records of meetings, contacts, speaking engagements and other activities arising from this work (including more general feedback). This now appears to be recorded more systematically on an excel spreadsheet (‘Position Tracker’). This is a useful tool, but could be refined further so that the information can be more readily mapped against specific outcomes and objectives.

With an organisation as small as SMK there is a fine balance to be had between planning and reviewing its work and just getting on with it. A commitment to learning and maximising impact should not mean getting bogged down in targets and measures, but there is scope to be more strategic about this. For example, spending some time at the start of the year (or the start of a new project):

* agreeing annual objectives and outcomes and ensuring there is a clear record of these;
* deciding what success looks like and how you will keep track of this, whether a specific piece of work or who you are reaching (eg grassroots or large charity);
* putting systems in place to ensure that relevant information is routinely recorded (such as the current Position Tracker spread sheet); and
* setting a date / milestones for review.

The aim should be to build this into your work so that it doesn’t become an afterthought, something else to do when you are already very busy. The appointment of a Learning and Knowledge Lead on the staff team is an opportunity to review your approach to impact and embed this even more firmly in your work.

**Conclusion**

TSCP appears to have been a game-changer for SMK, raising its profile and reputation while at the same time enabling it to develop a clearer and shared understanding of what social change is and how civil society’s efforts to create change can be effectively supported. At the same its work on the Lobbying Act has seen it become a powerful voice advocating for social change-making and change-makers, even by those who do not always agree. The process of engaging a wide range of individuals from across the sector in developing the project has also helped to create an emerging Community of Practice.

TSCP has also provided a strong theoretical and practical underpinning for SMK’s capacity building work. It has allowed it to inform and refresh its training programmes, and develop new tools and approaches that enable individuals and organisations to become more effective in achieving social change. As a result, SMK can offer a broader suite of support. It is now reaching larger organisations, as reflected in the growing interest in consultancy and attendance at Masterclasses, and developing new ways of working with and through other organisations to reach those at the grassroots.

While there is considerable goodwill towards SMK, stakeholders question whether SMK has the capacity and reach to sustain and develop its role and continue to be the strong voice for civil society and social change that is needed. A finding of this evaluation is that SMK has begun to consolidate its position, using its higher profile and reputation to do so, whether that is through funding for policy and advocacy or self-generated income from consultancy. The key question is whether it can again revise its strategy in such a way as to build on this momentum to strengthen its role and impact.

1. The Social Change Project, 2017, *Report from Phase One: The ‘Burning Issues’* Shelia McKechnie Foundation [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sheila McKechnie Foundation, 2016, *SMK Strategic Framework 2016 - 2021* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. B Pratten, 2016, *SMK Evaluation of Campaigner Support Programmes* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)