

# **Charged and ready for**

# **2022**

What we've been up to  
and *where we're headed...*

# Welcome

**At the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK), we recognise that change often begins in civil society. From it have come better rights and protections, changes in social attitudes, and new ways to support each other, our communities and the natural world.**

The power civil society\* has to drive change – in one person’s life or our entire society – is most effective when we work at our best and without unreasonable constraint. We call this **Social Power**, and our new mission is to unleash it.

But we know we have our work cut out. In early 2020, just before Covid-19 arrived, we agreed a new strategy to help civil society unleash its Social Power. We’d like to tell you a little about how we have been taking it forward these last two, extraordinary, years and where we’re now headed.

We are a small organisation trying to effect a big shift in our sector. We are clear that we are only as strong and effective as our relationships are with all of you – our friends, partners, clients, supporters, funders and other stakeholders. So, we’d really like to hear what you think. And how we can best support and work with you.

\*And by the way, our definition of civil society is all the activities of citizens in which collective action is undertaken, without coercion, for social good, independently of government and the market.

# The context

Civil society today is working in an extremely tough environment. Covid-19 has both revealed and put new stresses on our increasingly unequal society. Political fragmentation, ‘culture wars’ and an often hostile government, has created political challenge. The urgency of the climate crisis pulls everything into sharp relief.

There are some positives: campaigners see public support growing; there is growing appetite to tackle deep, systemic problems together; and tech-enabled social movements are building pressure for change. To navigate the challenges and build on the positive drivers, civil society needs to be firing on all cylinders. Working at its absolute best. But it isn’t, for a range of reasons.

## External factors

- **The economic structure of the sector.** Notably the long-term shift from grant funding to commissioning, and approaches to performance management, are pushing the sector into an increasingly transactional mode.
- **The public and key stakeholders often don’t understand our role and value.** Many equate us with a concept of ‘charity’ rooted in a notion of Victorian philanthropy, which is out of step with the complex, systemic way most in our sector work.
- **Civic space is under threat.** From overt measures such as the Lobbying Act, ‘anti-advocacy’ clauses, and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, to less concrete but still corrosive threats like ‘culture wars’ tactics.

## Internal factors

- **As a sector, we lack ‘big picture’ capacity.** This includes evidence about what is working in trying to drive change, spaces for collaboration, and the ability to collectively horizon scan and plan for the long-term.
- **We are not sufficiently power-aware.** We need to use our power to draw together the experience and energy of all in civil society. And we must get our house in order on issues of diversity, inclusion, and accountability.
- **Norms in sector leadership and organisational culture can work against effective campaigning.** They are often risk-averse, slow to move, and disinclined to collaborate.

# Social Power

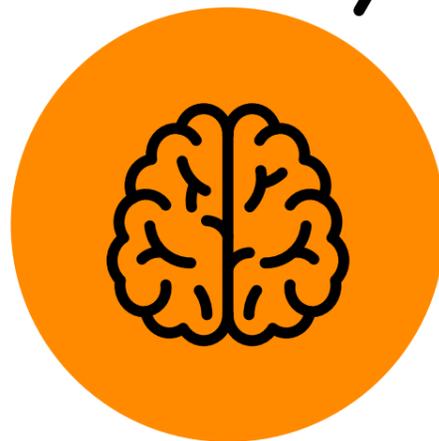
# Our strategic response

Our new strategy responds to this analysis. We aim to unleash Social Power by working in three core ways:



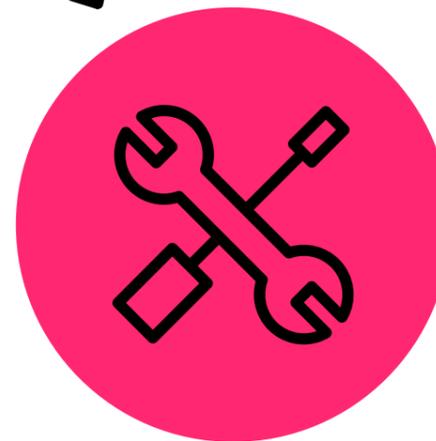
## Champions

We are champions. We stand up for civil society's role and value, defending civic space and the right to campaign. We celebrate the very best campaigns and campaigners each year at the SMK National Campaigner Awards.



## Think tank

We are a think tank. We gather strategic intelligence on how change is happening, innovate new approaches and tools, and encourage closer collaboration around shared goals. As well as our ongoing tracking of how change happens, we undertake deep enquiries such as our current Power Project.



## Capacity builders

We are capacity-builders. We strengthen our sector by developing its knowledge, skills and confidence in campaigning and social change. We do this by providing resources, and supporting people and organisations directly through our training and consultancy services.

Together, these three roles allow us to be a catalyst – helping people and organisations drive positive and inclusive social change. We work right across civil society, from unpaid volunteers to big national and international organisations. We bring a wide view of social change and power, offering tools to aid clear thinking and sound strategy in what are complex and dynamic systems. We work in close collaboration with those who are experts in their disciplines, as well as other sector bodies. Our USP – and our value to others – is our clear focus on social change.

Our new vision is:

**A more confident and powerful *civil society* in which people work together to drive social change**

## How are we taking this strategy forward?



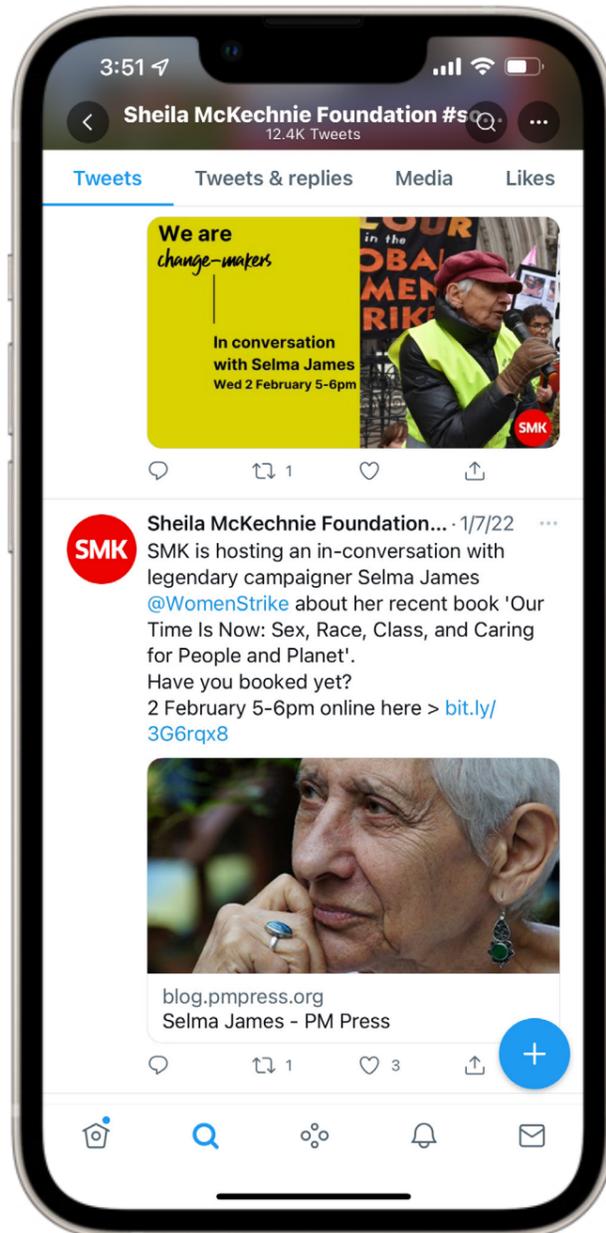
# Think tank

### We've continued to explore social change

We create spaces for change-makers to come together and share their experiences and ideas. And we are constantly tracking the emerging trends and tactics that shape today's campaigning.

Our events have explored examples of change, challenged the status quo of what it means to be an activist, and our end-of-year 'shakedowns' offer a chance to reflect on and celebrate some tough times. Our new We are change-makers events series hosts conversations with change-makers, authors, and commentators. If there are people you'd like to hear from, please let us know.

**We create spaces for change-makers to come together and share their experiences and ideas**



# We are change-makers

## We've asked difficult questions



With #MeToo still unfolding, Black Lives Matter becoming a force for change in the UK, and #CharitySoWhite growing in influence, our Power Project feels incredibly timely. Our brief was to explore what would it look like if civil society in London was better at sharing power in pursuit of social change. Over two years, we have hosted workshops, drawn on the years of thinking about power that already exists, and worked with a core learning group (CLG), whose members have first-hand experience of poverty or inequality, learned experience, and a mixture of both.

It has been the most complex and challenging project we have undertaken, but of critical importance. Early in 2022, we will be issuing a challenge to social sector professionals – where we see the greatest potential, and arguably duty, to make change – inviting them to think afresh about power and commit more deeply to using their power to help support greater solidarity and inclusivity.

In the next two years, we will be putting this work to the test by partnering with organisations who are signed up to becoming more power aware and sharing what we learn as we go.

### We've made sure campaigners stayed connected

Our analysis and comment pieces, newsletters and social media posts do not stop. We use these to share news from across the campaign community, as well as our own.

The Social Power Scotland pilot is exploring the value in creating a new space for change-makers in Scotland to pool knowledge, ideas and resources that could strengthen their ability to drive change – individually and collectively.



### Looking ahead

We hope to be able to do even more to track and analyse social change in the UK – from big picture horizon-scanning to deep-dive analyses of specific examples of change. We'd like to be better connected to the academic world, and with those in the private sector where we have common cause. We're also working with our associates to develop new thinking as to how best to track, measure and learn from social change. We know it's complicated – but we'd like to help crack it!

## How are we taking this strategy forward?

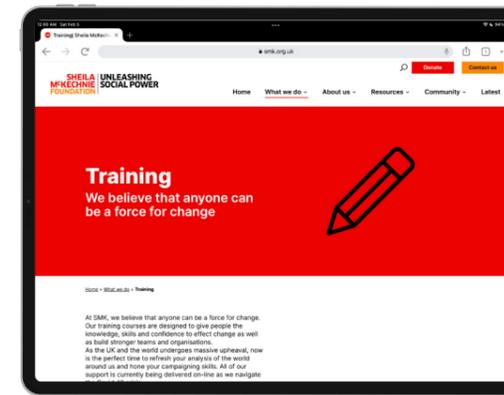
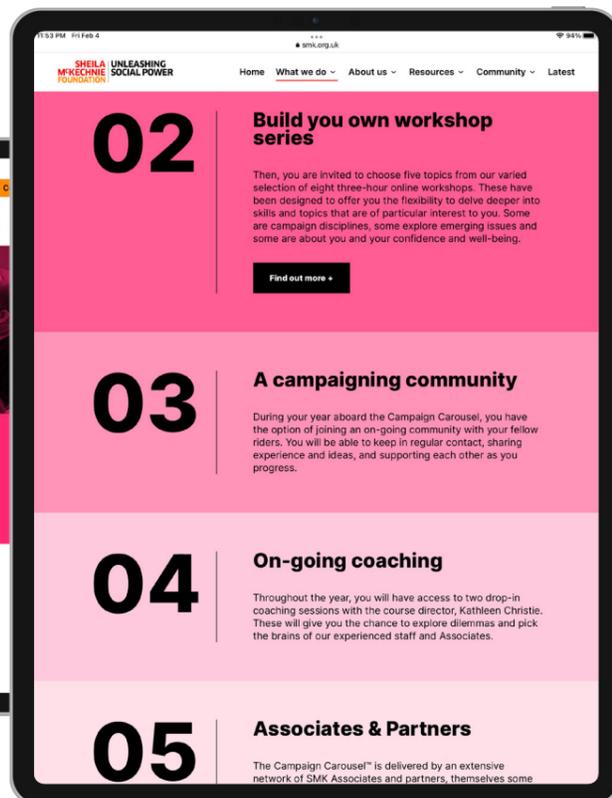


# Capacity builders

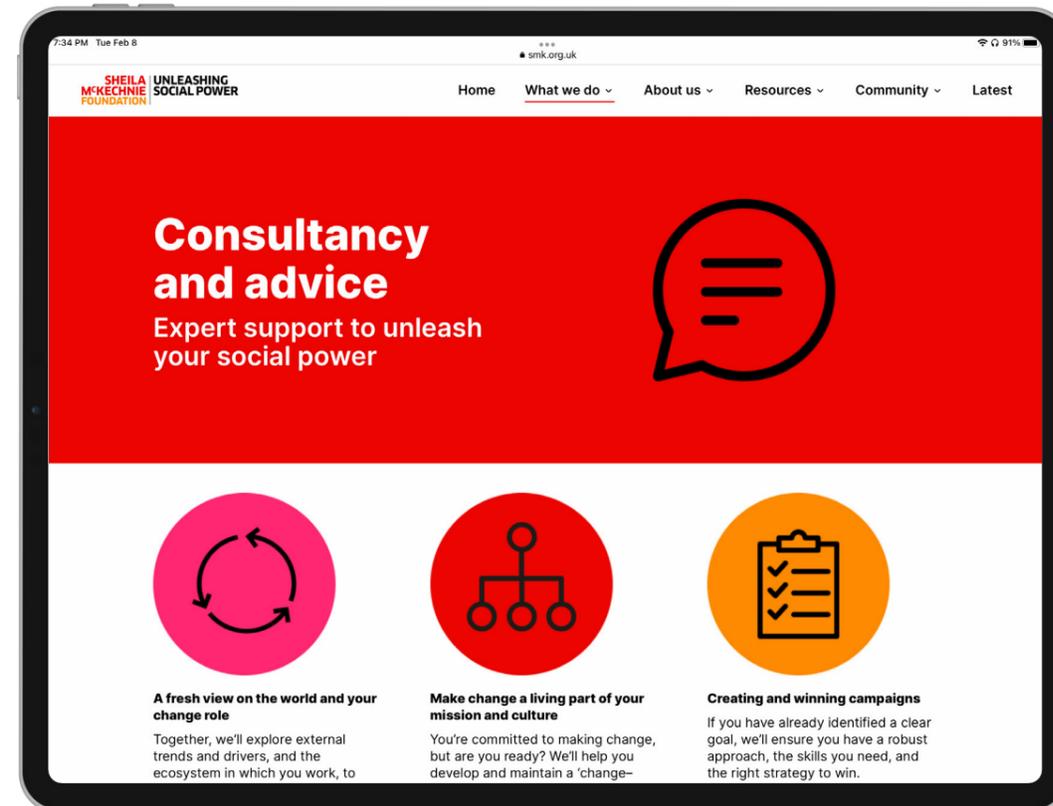
### We've launched a new training programme

In January 2021, we launched the Campaign Carousel™ – a new flexible and fully digital training programme. This doesn't simply take our existing training online: we have comprehensively reviewed and revised our content to ensure it equips campaigners with the tools they need to create change today. The programme runs three times a year, and 'riders' can 'jump on and off' to suit their needs. The Campaign Carousel™ is delivered with some of the leading thinkers and practitioners in their fields. And we are delighted with the results. Going virtual has democratised SMK's training, transforming our geographical reach.

We've also run bespoke and in-house training programmes for big charities like Centrepoint and NSPCC, and local organisations such as MAP and Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.



Going virtual has democratised SMK's training, transforming our geographical reach



### We are working with organisations to sharpen their strategy and build capacity

Meanwhile, our strategic consultancy has helped clients like the Royal College of Nursing, Mark Leonard Trust grantees, and the Traveller Movement run more effective campaigns. We were also commissioned by the Local Trust (LT) to deliver workshops and coaching for local activists in Big Local and Creative Civic Change areas.

### Looking ahead

We want to broaden our reach and ensure our offer works harder to meet the needs of people facing economic barriers and minoritised groups. We aim to keep our capacity building work developing and evolving to reflect emerging knowledge about how change happens. In particular, we want to integrate the learning from our Power Project into the way we work with organisations, helping to make power awareness an integral part of social change.

## How are we taking this strategy forward?



# Champions

### We've made sure campaigners are 'seen'

Our 2020 Annual Campaigner Survey was covered in both the Guardian and sector press. Campaigners told us that politicians are now far more likely to be negative about campaigning than the public – and it's a growing gap. This comes after years of tightening government restrictions on campaigning and increasingly intolerant attitudes to dissent.



### We've defended civic space

Since the start of the pandemic, the shrinking of UK civic space has accelerated. We captured what was happening and worked alongside others to share intelligence and lobby on proposals – from clamping down on protest to restricting judicial review. We made a stand against some of the more damaging rhetoric, such as Nigel Farage's attack on the RNLI and unfounded criticism of the Runnymede Trust. We're now working on a new research project that seeks to deepen our understanding of threats to civic space, and how those threats can best be countered.

### We're helping civil society rediscover its reforming roots

We're working with the CEOs of large, household name organisations who share an ambition for charities to 'take their proper place in the national conversation'. We are supporting them to 'lead by example', to be 'bold and brave' in injecting their broader social analysis into our national debate, and to better understand the context in which they are working. This feels particularly timely as we start to come out of the most critical phase of the pandemic here in the UK.

Our CEO, Sue Tibballs, contributed an [essay](#) for the launch of the Law Family Commission on Civil Society. As members of its technical panel, we ensure that reform is given as much attention as service delivery in its deliberations.

### We've celebrated the very best

Our 2020 and 2021 SMK National Campaigner Awards reached their largest ever audience when we broadcast live on YouTube. Winners in the past two years included Marcus Rashford and Fareshare for their work on food poverty, Joeli Brearley for her brilliant Pregnant then Screwed campaign, and Elaine Lovell who secured free to use ATMs for her local community. The Awards celebrate the breadth and diversity of campaigning in the UK, and winners tell us that they have gained confidence, authority, and profile.



We're now working on a new research project that seeks to deepen our understanding of threats to civic space, and how those threats can best be countered

### Looking ahead

Going forward, we are hopeful we can do even more to advocate for the campaign community, based on a deeper analysis of what strategies work. We hope to extend our convening role, building confidence in civil society's reforming role and providing more visible platforms to speak up and be heard.



# We feel stronger

## But would love to hear from you

In the last two years, we have also invested in our core strength. We launched our new brand and website at the end of 2020 – we hope you like it! We are delivering a digital transformation plan to strengthen our communications, accessibility and data management. Customers will soon be able to book training and events directly via our website.

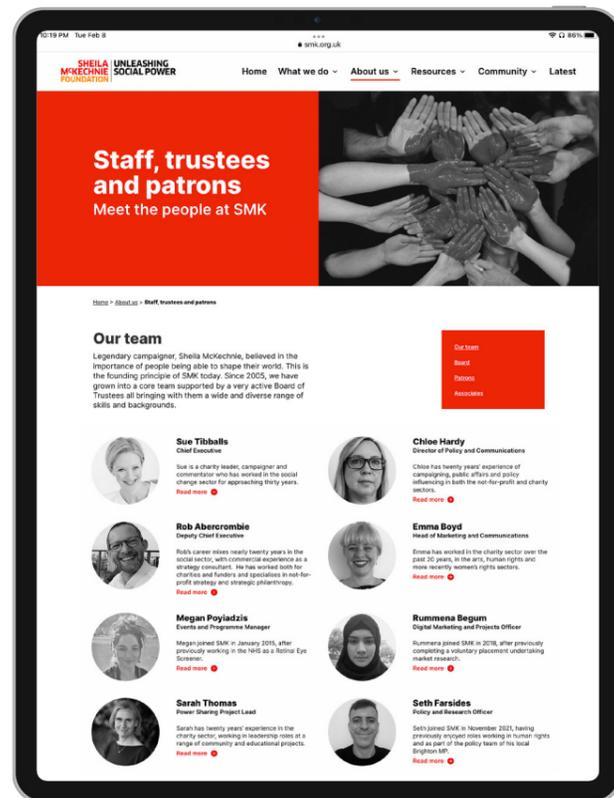
We have worked to strengthen our governance by ensuring that the voices and experience on our board reflect the very many communities we serve. We enjoy fantastic support and challenge from our trustees.

And our team has grown – not a lot, but even a little makes a big difference. We are now eight people (seven FTE). If you'd like to know more about how we are funded, you can access our latest annual accounts here: [www.smk.org.uk/about-us](http://www.smk.org.uk/about-us)

2020 and 2021 were not the years any of us expected, but we are now a stronger organisation. That's due to the immense efforts of our staff, the passion of our collaborators, and the unswerving support of our funders. Thank you.

As an 'infrastructure' organisation, all we do is in service of helping all of you, the social sector and wider civil society 'play big' across a huge range of social challenges. So, if you have comments or suggestions about our strategy and how we are taking it forward, we'd love to hear from you.

Similarly, if you share our enthusiasm for unleashing the social power of civil society and would like to get more involved in what we do, then please get in touch at [info@smk.org.uk](mailto:info@smk.org.uk).



UNLEASHING  
SOCIAL ACTION

UNLEASHING  
SOCIAL CHANGE

UNLEASHING  
SOCIAL POWER

# Acknowledgments

## Thank you to all our funders, partners, sponsors and clients

We at SMK are able to do what we do thanks to the support of our funders, partners, sponsors and clients – most of whom are listed below. Our heartfelt thanks to you all.

# Thanks

The AB Charitable Trust | The Baring Foundation  
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Paul Hamlyn Foundation | Refugee Action | RNID  
RSPCA | Shelter | Trust for London | Tudor Trust  
Unbound Philanthropy | WHICH? | The Wildlife Trusts

# Part think tank, trainer, convener, and champion, SMK is facilitating a new approach to *civil society* – the people and organisations outside of government and business

Change often begins in civil society. We believe it has the potential to drive deeper and longer-lasting change – in one person’s life or our entire society – if it works at its best and without unreasonable constraint. We call this **Social Power**.

We unleash civil society’s Social Power by being curious about how change happens, by building its confidence and effectiveness, and by championing campaigners and campaigning.

We are passionate, single-minded, and tenacious. We think like campaigners: we analyse problems, find ways to overcome them, and bring people with us. We use our independence to stand up against those who put barriers and constraints in the way. Social justice drives our approach, and we are committed to using our own power to create greater equity. We work right across civil society, from those campaigning from their front rooms to those in the offices of global organisations.

**Campaigners need someone to support and campaign for them too.  
And that’s SMK.**

**SHEILA  
McKECHNIE  
FOUNDATION** | **UNLEASHING  
SOCIAL POWER**

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