

**SHEILA
MCKECHNIE
FOUNDATION** | **UNLEASHING
SOCIAL POWER**



The Power Project

Learning Review

November 2023

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Introduction

Inequity, exclusion and oppression are systemic in our society. They are woven through our institutions, our organisational structures and our social codes, and internalised within us. These systems exist within the sector we work in too. The social sector does not reflect the communities it exists to serve or offer equitable opportunities within it. Certain kinds of knowledge, typically those gained through professional or academic experience, are valued over others. This must change, and we at the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK) are committed to being part of that change.

Since 2020, SMK has hosted [The Power Project](#) to explore what it would look like for charities and social sector organisations to ‘share power’ – or work in ‘deeper solidarity’ to use the language we consciously chose. Our intention has been to find more equitable ways for organisations to work alongside people and communities with first-hand experience of social issues in their campaigning and social change strategies. We learned that despite good intentions, current attempts to work in solidarity ‘often fall woefully short’.¹

It is with deep regret that we now acknowledge that, despite our own commitment and good intentions, we ourselves have fallen short. Some of the people involved in the Power Project feel badly let down.

These people were members of a Core Learning Group (CLG) set up to guide the project. The Power Project invited a level of investment from CLG members that was powerful for all of us. CLG members contributed openly and generously, and close relationships were formed. The work encouraged a deep sense of commitment to the project and its ambitions. This led, quite understandably, to a sense of ownership and an expectation of future involvement.

We at SMK failed to meet this expectation. While the circumstances at the time made this difficult, we take responsibility for encouraging an expectation we could not meet. We recognise that this experience will have reinforced feelings of exploitation and exclusion that would have been deeply hurtful. We also recognise that there were shortcomings in the way the Board led its own process that made it harder for a resolution to be found.

On both counts, SMK would like to extend its sincere apologies to the people concerned.

This has been a difficult time for all involved. Our staff and Board have found the process painful, but we operate within a team and with organisational structures and processes that offer some protection – and within the status quo of the wider system. Those raising their voices against us are activists, largely outside of that system. We know this can be a hard and lonely stance to take. We are sorry for the cost of this experience to them.

When SMK’s Board concluded its process in February this year, they promised SMK would publish this Learning Review. We begin with a summary of the background to the Power Project, our response when concerns were raised and our perspective now. We then set out some of our learning, both from the Power Project and the Board-led process. We end with some questions we have found especially difficult to reconcile. We hope that our reflections have value for others working to change a society and sector that they are, at the same time, embedded within.

This journey has also raised a wider question for SMK: how do we, as an organisation, seek to work in deeper solidarity? Alongside this Learning Review, we are publishing a new [Solidarity and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion \(EDI\) Strategy](#) that sets out how we will advance our own commitment to solidarity and EDI in future. We welcome feedback and further dialogue on both our learning and our future commitments. You can contact us at info@smk.org.uk.

¹ See SMK’s guide *It’s All About Power* (2021, p.8)

Background

The Power Project explored what it means for social sector organisations to work in deeper solidarity with people with first-hand experience of poverty and inequality in social change. It was a longer and more complex project than we anticipated.²

Our question evolved as the project evolved. Initially, we were asked to host an inquiry into how to ‘grow the voice and influence of people with lived experience’ in social change. Early conversations revealed that the way lived experience is spoken about in the sector can feel tokenistic and can reinforce an experience of marginalisation and exclusion. We also learned that the question posed to us had many of these assumptions baked in.

We shifted tack and tried instead to do something ambitious. We brought together changemakers and campaigners, from both inside and outside formal social change organisations, to take part in conversations about power. We hoped that a lens of power would deepen our understanding of the barriers to working together equitably and inform a way forward. We designed the project to be participatory, but it wasn’t intended to be co-produced. Staff hosted countless conversations and workshops and commissioned community research, alongside convening a series of in-depth conversations with the CLG. We tried to approach the inquiry in a way that itself supported the transformation of power dynamics in the sector, even if only in a small way.

SMK staff drew on all these conversations, literature, and our own reflections to write *It’s All About Power* - a guide for social sector organisations seeking to work in deeper solidarity in social change. Its publication in March 2022 marked the end of the first phase of the Power Project and of our initial funding.

Following the launch, two members of the CLG told us that their contribution to the launch had been tokenistic. We had limited their participation to their ‘lived experience’ and not allowed them to bring their wider skills and experience. We talked together about what a more meaningful involvement might look like. Yet, despite some conversations feeling hopeful, trust in SMK staff and in the project broke down. Those two members of the CLG, one of whom was also a trustee at SMK, brought their concerns to SMK’s Board in July 2022.

The Board set up a process to consider the concerns, led by our Vice Chair, and a set of questions were agreed by all. These questions centred on who ‘owns’ the work produced on the Power Project and what opportunities exist for members of the CLG to stay involved. There was also a broader question about the opportunities for people with lived or first-hand experience at SMK.

Staff shared a response, along with some proposals, at a meeting in November 2022. It soon became clear that the process had failed, and relationships had broken down. The Board concluded their process without arriving at an agreed way forward in February 2023. Concerns have since been raised publicly, and the person who was also a trustee tendered their resignation from the Board.

Our response when concerns were raised

When those CLG members told us their involvement in the launch of *It’s All About Power* was tokenistic we were, of course, disappointed. We had worked so hard together to understand exactly this issue over the previous two years. Yet, in that moment, we found it hard to know how to respond.

The question being asked of us was how members of the CLG could be involved in the work going forward, and in ways that allowed them to bring their wider skills and experience. An immediate and practical problem was that we didn’t know if the work would continue. Our attempt to fundraise for a second phase of the project, to bring the tools and insights in *It’s All About Power* into organisations, had only been partially

² A more detailed overview of the Power Project is set out in the Annex.

successful. We were continuing to look for match funding, while negotiating with our funder about whether we could continue and, if so, what the project should look like next.

Perhaps we could have stated more clearly at that time that there simply wasn't an opportunity to remain involved. The CLG had existed to guide a participatory research project. Many of its members had drifted away once this phase was complete. But we knew that those who had raised concerns were keen to stay involved. We felt it was important to explore how they, or others who brought knowledge gained from first-hand experience, could be involved should funding be secured.

We tried to be transparent. We drafted a 'Capabilities Model'³ to unpack the different kinds of skills and knowledge we draw on at SMK. We included specific technical skills and knowledge gained from first-hand experience and explained that we valued each of these equally. We set out the range of roles and relationships at SMK, from staff, trustees and associates to contractors and consultants, and explored the different accountabilities each held. We wanted to show clearly how anyone, whether bringing lived or learnt experience or both, can be involved in our work in a wide range of ways.

We hoped our Capabilities Model would inform more conscious and intentional conversations at SMK about who we could work with, but this was not how it was received. It was understood to be a 'checklist' that we at SMK would use to assess those with lived experience. Looking back, we think we can see more clearly why our response did not work.

It was a mistake for the SMK team to develop detailed responses to the questions raised without involving CLG members. When the Board-led process began, staff stepped back from communicating directly with them to ensure the integrity of the process. But these were people with whom we had formed relationships based on trust and mutual respect, through the challenging work we had done together. When, following a long period of silence, staff shared a paper with responses they had considered at length we can see that it might have been perceived as technical and technocratic.

We take responsibility for both the process leading up to, and the communication of, our proposals.

Our perspective now

With the benefit of hindsight, we can also see that we were not really hearing what was being asked of us.

We responded to questions about 'involvement' by pointing out the practical constraints we ourselves were working within. We countered questions about 'ownership' with comments about our accountability to our wider stakeholders. None of this acknowledged the real depth of feeling – belonging, perhaps – these people had experienced as part of the project.

Meanwhile, from the privileged position of our secure role in the sector, SMK was taking the work we had collaborated on together forward, to secure new funding and opportunities.

We can entirely see how this would have been disappointing, frustrating and reinforcing of previous experiences of exclusion and exploitation that are all too common in the sector. It is true that we were working within practical constraints, but we also encouraged and facilitated a level of investment and expectation that was hard for us to meet. And which we take responsibility for.

We can also see that the questions asked of us required us to look beyond those practical constraints. This could have been a moment for a creative conversation about how people in the CLG could stay involved, perhaps re-designing the next stage of the project – and SMK itself - to facilitate that. But we did not recognise the need for that conversation. We take responsibility for that too.

On both counts, we are truly sorry.

³ The draft Capabilities Model is included in the Annex.

The transition from collaborating in a research project to launching the final output with a call for change in the sector was significant. Having stepped out of our personal and professional positions to inquire together, we found that going public somehow put us back in our respective positions. The team at SMK shifted focus to delivering against our accountabilities and managing the messages we had worked so hard to develop. For some members of the CLG, they were back in a limited role as a 'person with lived experience'. Almost immediately, strong relationships became marred by distrust. We became entrenched in our respective positions.

As part of the process of reaching this position, we have reflected on both the Power Project and the Board-led process that sought to resolve the concerns. We share our thoughts below.

Our Learning from the Power Project

We believe the Power Project was a well-run project within the scope of how it was conceived and designed, particularly as it took place within the Covid pandemic. We worked hard to consider power dynamics within the project, and to value the different kinds of knowledge and experience people brought.

In practical terms this meant, for example, paying everyone who took part at SMK's usual associate rate if they were not participating as part of a salaried role. This rate was the same, regardless of whether that person drew on knowledge and expertise from professional or first-hand experience. We also commissioned community researchers to help us reach people whose perspective we may not otherwise have heard.

We owned up to mistakes we made along the way. For example, we were challenged for using an image unwisely in a meeting, and for not attributing quotes used in the guide more carefully. Each time, we apologised and changed our actions. We believe that, on the whole, participants were happy with both the process and the final product, *It's All About Power*. Nevertheless, there are some things we would do differently.

The project favoured flexibility over structure, so key transitions were missed

The Power Project was a complex project, with a lot of people involved. We adapted continually to changing circumstances, emerging insights and the interests and appetite of the CLG. We wrote about the need to listen and respond as vital aspects of what it means to work in solidarity in *It's All About Power*.

We still believe our willingness to adapt was key to the success of the project, but it also brought difficulties. Key milestones in the project brought opportunities to celebrate successes, renegotiate roles and objectives and clearly communicate next steps. These opportunities were missed at various moments throughout the project.

Most significantly, the delayed publication of *It's All About Power* coincided with uncertainty around future funding, creating a blurred boundary between the end of the first phase of the project and the beginning of the second. Managing and communicating this transition more skilfully would have allowed us to begin and end each phase with greater clarity for all involved.

We didn't define, and redefine, the role of the Core Learning Group clearly enough

The role of the Core Learning Group evolved as the project itself evolved. Our original invitation was for an 'advisory' group that met occasionally⁴. In response to an appetite for greater involvement, we shifted to an 'inquiry' group that met monthly for seven months for in-depth conversations about power. We used terms like 'brains-trust' and 'co-inquiry' to describe our intention without explicitly defining what we meant. We did not issue Terms of Reference or contracts. We chose to prioritise flexibility to remove barriers to participation, but clear written agreements would have offered protection and accountability for us all.

When the CLG meetings ended and SMK staff began the task of synthesis and writing, we kept in touch and shared drafts of the guide. Engagement of some members of the CLG understandably dwindled. We should have clarified the scope and role of the group during that phase. Later, as we prepared to launch the guide and take our insights into organisations, the roles required were different again.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that members of the CLG could not have fulfilled these roles. We knew from our work together that they had skills and experience far beyond what they brought to our conversations. But the commitment, scope and purpose of the group deserved more intentional consideration as the project progressed.

⁴ The initial invitation to join the CLG is included in the Annex.

SMK staff felt conflicted in our role as project hosts

Staff at SMK felt a strong sense of personal responsibility for the success of the project and care towards its participants. Our conversations continually reiterated the need for those in social sector roles to value relationships, be responsive and value different kinds of knowledge and experience equally. We reflected deeply on our own position and identity, as individuals and an organisation. We tried to approach the project with humility and curiosity and a commitment to mutual learning and growth.

In this context, asserting clear boundaries felt almost like an abuse of power. On reflection, our failure to do this clearly and consistently enough raised expectations in a way that was an abnegation of our responsibility as hosts of the project.

Our Learning from the Board-led Process

When the two people raising concerns felt unable to reach a resolution with staff, they took their concerns to SMK's Board. The Board took time to listen carefully and set up its process when it became clear a resolution would not easily be reached. It was agreed by all that these were concerns being raised, not a formal complaint or grievance. The Board set up a sub-group, led by our Vice Chair, to investigate.

The sub-group arranged a series of meetings to talk further with those concerned, with others involved in the CLG and with SMK staff. They summarised the concerns as a list of questions, agreed by all, that staff were asked to respond to. While this process seemed sensible, it was perhaps not the right approach.

We have reflected on our key learning from the Board-led process, which is summarised below.

We may have moved to quickly to adopt a formal process and a corporate stance

The Board sub-group went to great lengths to manage things well, but the process was at odds with the relational, collaborative approach of the Power Project. Rather than build on the strong relationships that had existed until this point, the process seemed to undermine those relationships and create distance between us.

When comments and allegations began to be made about us online, we followed standard communications advice and did not respond. We took a more 'corporate' stance and published a statement. We are not sure there is a right or wrong way to respond in this situation, but we found it hard not to acknowledge comments and engage. As a small organisation seeking to strengthen relationships with those we work with, we could perhaps have taken a different approach.

We should have been clearer about what we needed to manage this process better

The Board has policy and procedure to manage a formal complaint but were responding to concerns that we did not fully understand. Designing the process led to delays. At times, it also left individual Board members shouldering more of the burden than felt fair.

Several times, both early in the process and as conversations continued, we considered a different approach, including offering external facilitation or mediation. These suggestions were not taken forward. On reflection, a different approach might have been necessary. Despite the best intentions, our Board were not equipped to understand the true nature of the concerns or resolve the conflict that was arising without external support. Had we acknowledged this sooner some of the difficulties, and some of the hurt, may have been avoided.

Recruiting a Core Learning Group member to the Board created a conflict of interest

In the early stages of the Power Project, it seemed a positive step to bring someone with direct experience of the issues we were exploring onto the Board. Later, when they expressed concerns about the project, this led to a significant conflict of interest. There was some confusion around whether this person was raising concerns in their capacity as a Board member or a participant in the project.

The Board member agreed to be recused from Board deliberations about the concerns raised, but this recusal was not documented in writing. This led to further confusion. We are sincerely sorry for the difficulties this caused for the person concerned.

Our Questions about Solidarity in Social Change

This has been a long journey for us at SMK. We have written several drafts of this review and wrestled with many things along the way. We are sharing our learning because we know that questions of power, legitimacy and accountability are alive in the sector, and because we remain committed to using our position to encourage faster and deeper progress towards solidarity in social change.

Despite many months of reflection, we are left with questions we are not yet able to resolve.

How can the sector overcome the limitations of language?

We learned early in the Power Project that there are limitations to the language of lived experience. But it is also true that there are difficulties associated with losing it.

Not everyone is comfortable with being defined as a ‘person with lived experience’, particularly by someone who is not also applying this label to themselves. As others are recognising, it limits the full expression of that person’s potential. It also encourages a binary distinction around people with lived experience and those in professional roles, which is simply untrue. We spoke to many people on the Power Project, working for social sector organisations, who also identify as having lived experience of a social issue. Some choose to talk about it in their work but others, for various reasons, choose not to.

On the Power Project, we shifted focus away from specific aspects of a person’s experience and onto the relationship – and power dynamic – that exists between people inside and outside of organisations. We hoped that offering tools to help people see this dynamic more clearly would support them to intentionally shape it into one that is more equal.

Yet, knowledge gained from lived or first-hand experience is, as we know, undervalued and overlooked. It is imperative that it is clearly named and articulated and given the value it rightfully deserves. We have been challenged for moving focus away from the value of lived experience as a source of knowledge, just as it is gaining traction in the sector.

Talking about power usefully revealed the different ways that inequality can manifest but felt abstract for some. We shifted our language again to talk about solidarity, to signal our intention was to help people stand together in their efforts for change. For some, this is an inspiring call to action. For others, it is jargon that leaves them cold.

We have reflected on these issues at length. But as our understanding has developed, we have not managed to communicate clearly enough to keep people with us. While finding the right language feels urgent, taking the time to grapple with these complex and contradictory concepts and ideas can seem like a distraction from the urgent work of social change.

How can charities hold the tension between solidarity and accountability with limited resource?

As a charity, we are under pressure to comply with regulations and to meet expectations of efficiency and effectiveness in an increasingly bureaucratic environment. We are also, rightly, under pressure to show how we are involving people and communities with first-hand experience in our work. We struggled to navigate this tension.

During the first phase of the Power Project, we worked hard to create a space where people who may feel excluded by bureaucratic processes and narrow definitions of professionalism could participate. In effect, we think we went too far in this direction. Taking away too many boundaries led to a lack of clarity that left us all exposed. The Board-led process went too far in the other direction. In adopting a formal process to seek a resolution for those that felt excluded from our work, we found we had perpetuated and reinforced that experience.

We have been asked whether we could have redesigned the second phase of the Power Project, together with those CLG members who wanted to stay involved. We would like to say yes. Yet, SMK is a very small team working across various projects at pace. To reconfigure the scope and purpose of a project, while continuing to deliver it, requires time and resource – particularly when relationships are under strain. It is hard for a project, or an organisation, to change without feeling confident that the wider system around it will change too.

Can the sector make space for voices of first-hand experience as a disruptive force?

There are not enough opportunities for people to bring vital knowledge gained from first-hand experience to the sector. SMK is committed to playing our part, but there is only so much a single organisation can do to affect change.

There needs to be proper funding to support those who want to work in the sector to develop the skills and confidence to do so. We heard on the Power Project that, for some campaigners, it is easier to attract funding to work alone than to secure a job. To achieve the diversity the sector needs, we need funded pathways to help people through.

We also heard that not all campaigners choose to work in a professional role. For some, that would compromise their values and their voice. If the social sector is to work in closer solidarity with people with first-hand experience, these are voices it needs to hear. Their power and influence lie in their ability – their demand – to disrupt the social norms and professional codes of the formal social sector, and their refusal to be co-opted into the status quo.

It has been hard for us at SMK to be on the receiving end of these demands but, in many ways, we agree with those who have raised their voices against us. The sector needs to change.

What next for SMK?

The challenges we have faced are not new. Throughout history, civil society has navigated tensions between revolution and evolution, urgency and legitimacy, leadership and shared power. Grappling with contested or paradoxical ideas is part and parcel of political struggle.

Whether or not we were equipped to lead this project is a question we have asked of ourselves. We are a small organisation, with limited resource. We work closely with campaigners and change makers of all kinds, but not in depth with any communities with first-hand experience of specific social issues.

That is why we wrote *It's All About Power* specifically for others working in organisations, because we felt that was the most useful contribution we could make from our position. We hoped to encourage more people, and more organisations, to join us on this journey towards deeper solidarity in social change. We ended our guide with the words:

“There is no doubt that this will feel uncomfortable at times. Mistakes will be made... There is no perfect response – ours or yours. But it is vital, for the future of the social sector, civil society, and the wider society we hope to build together, that we make a start.”

Despite the difficulties, we think our vantage point as a social sector organisation rooted in campaigning has brought a unique and useful perspective to the debate around lived experience in the sector. Our position requires that we look outwards, at the work campaigners are doing to challenge systems of inequity and exclusion in society, and within, at our own culture, practice and assumptions. We hope that as all of us working in the social sector learn to navigate some of the tensions inherent in this work, we can continue to be supported to do so.

This work is charged with strong, and righteous, feelings. It would be easy to conclude that it is simply best avoided. Yet, we at SMK have grown stronger in our belief that social change is more powerful, and more effective, if we work together as equals. We need everyone, and all kinds of knowledge, to find solutions to the complex problems we face.

We remain committed to deepening our own understanding of what it means to work in solidarity for social change, and to using our position and influence within the sector to challenge and support others. We are reviewing our organisational culture and processes to ensure they support us to achieve our mission in partnership with our community of campaigners and taking action to embed this commitment across both the content and approach of all our programmes and processes.

Our new [Solidarity and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion \(EDI\) Strategy](#) sets out how we will advance these commitments.

We welcome feedback and further dialogue on both this Learning Review and our Solidarity and EDI Strategy. Please get in touch at info@smk.org.uk.

Annex

Overview of phase one of the Power Project

Phase One of the Power Project was a two-year inquiry into the experiences of people with first-hand experience of poverty and inequality engaging in social change. The project was funded by the Cornerstone Fund, a group of funders set up to drive systems change in London. SMK's role was to collect evidence, convene perspectives and make sense of what we heard.

Early in the project the Covid-19 pandemic struck, and we had to adapt. Plans for large in-person events were replaced by online small group and individual conversations between SMK staff members and a broad range of others. We had expected to throw our net wide, but the project became a deeper and more reflective inquiry.

At the outset, we established a '**Core Learning Group**'. Rather than a lived experience steering group, this was a diverse group of 'unusual suspects' including those working for social change in a range of formal roles within social sector organisations and others who choose to work apart. Some identified as having lived or first-hand experience of poverty, inequality or other social issues. One member was also a SMK Trustee.

The role and membership of the Core Learning Group evolved over the duration of the project. Initially, a fluid group met in-person every few months to guide, challenge and extend our thinking. During lockdown a committed group of nine people formed, meeting online for two hours per month over seven months for an honest and in-depth conversation about power in social change. Around half that group stayed involved as we prepared to publish the guide, offering feedback on drafts and meeting from time to time to discuss next steps.

We also established a wider '**Community of Practice**', which grew to over 300 people from across civil society. We communicated our thinking and shared resources with this group through a digital pinboard, blog and e-newsletters. Members had varying levels of involvement, from receiving updates to attending workshops and interviews, engaging with ongoing conversations with SMK staff and commenting on drafts of the guide.

We hosted **workshops attended by over 150 people**. This included two co-hosted with members of the Core Learning Group working as Community Researchers in their own communities, nine in partnership with social sector organisations and campaign groups, and five that included participants with a diverse mix of first-hand and professional experience from across the Community of Practice.

We commissioned **two community researchers** to undertake research on our behalf in their communities, to challenge our perspective and help us to include people in the project we would not otherwise have been able to reach.

SMK conducted **more than 50 interviews** and held many, many more informal conversations with people pursuing change from within their communities, social movements, social sector organisations and in academia. We undertook an in-depth **literature review** of power and social change, drawing on current and historical academic research and campaign practice within the UK and further afield.

We drew heavily on all these sources, as well as our own conversations and reflections as a staff team, to write the guide *It's All About Power*.

Initial Core Learning Group invitation (February 2020)

Dear

Thanks so much for your involvement in the Power Sharing Project so far. I have attached a fresh overview of the project, which we've rethought as a result of the workshop in January, and an outline project plan.

In brief:

The Power Sharing Project asks one central question: What would it look like if civil society in London was better at sharing power in pursuit of social change?

In the Social Change Project, we asked how change happens. Now we're asking 'who drives it?'

Everyone's ability to influence change is affected by their access to power and resources. So, the Power Sharing Project sets out to understand what an alternative vision for the future of civil society in London might be, if resources and power to drive change were better shared.

The project has a local focus on poverty and inequality in London—England's most unequal city.

Invitation to join the Core Learning Group

We would love for you to play a central role in the project, as a member of the Core Learning Group (CLG). It will be made up around 10 people, who come together at key moments in the project to co-design research, identify important insights or information, help to make sense of findings, and to plan for each new stage.

The CLG will also act as a peer mentoring group – as a network of change-makers with a keen interest in changing the power dynamics of the campaigning world in London. We are inviting people from across a spectrum of ways of working in civil society, but the group has an emphasis on less traditional access to civil society power, and on diversity.

We envisage the commitment to be around 3.5 days of face-to-face discussions over the next year (in April, October and January 2021) and probably a similar amount of time prepping and following up on those meetings. We are proposing a financial remuneration for those whose time will not otherwise be paid to be involved, of around £1,750 per person. Depending on our budget, there may be opportunities beyond January 2021.

The first meeting of the CLG would be at The Foundry (17 Oval Way, London SE11 5RR) on one of the following dates:

Mon 30th March 1.30-5pm

Tues 31st March 9.30am-1pm

Thurs 2nd April 9.30am-1pm

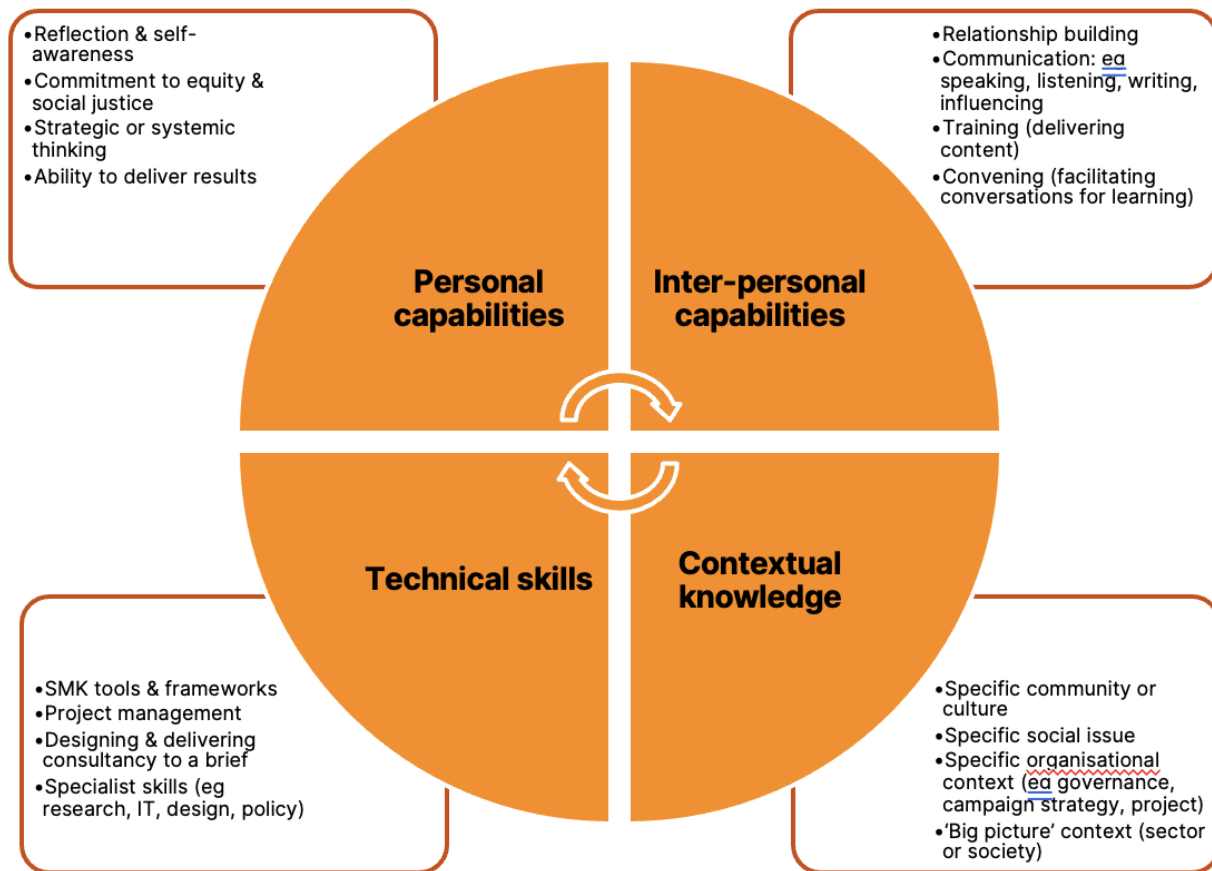
We realise this is soon but are keen to get moving quickly! If you are interested in joining, please give me a call or drop me an email to let me know if any of those dates work for you. I'd also be happy to discuss what we envisage from those days of work in more detail.

I really hope this is of interest – and look forward to hearing from you in the next week or so.

SMK's draft Capabilities Model (November 2022)

Our draft Capabilities Model is an attempt toward a more nuanced understanding of the diverse knowledge, skills and experience required to deliver our mission at SMK. Inherent in the model is the notion that all forms of knowledge and experience have equal value, but different kinds of knowledge or skills are required for different kinds of work.

This is a work in progress, which we are developing in response to feedback from others working within and apart from social sector organisations. We may not have all the headings exactly right but developing this model has helped us 'unpack' the different types of capabilities that SMK does – or could – draw on in its work.



Using the Capabilities Model

We intend to experiment with using the Capabilities Model to encourage us to think in more specific terms about what we need, and to challenge our assumptions about who can help us. Initial testing has been encouraging.

We anticipate using it as a tool to assess the capabilities needed to do a piece of work well, before considering the knowledge, skills and experience an individual brings to a task. There are some important principles to note before applying the tool.

Capabilities have equal value: The circular design reminds us that there is no implicit hierarchy of knowledge or experience. The intention is to give equal weight and value to each specific capability.

Capabilities can be developed through a range of experiences: Some, although not all, capabilities can be developed through a range of life, formal or informal education, or professional experiences. This means SMK should consider, and plan for, building our capacity to support people to develop capabilities through their work with us.

Capabilities are contextual: This framework has been developed for use in the context of SMK delivering its existing programme of work. As our objectives evolve, we will need to review it. Other organisations and settings may find the headings relevant, but the specific competencies required to be different.

People have capabilities beyond those they apply in each context: This is a tool for identifying the needs of a project or programme of work and finding people with the capabilities to meet them. It is not a tool for defining an individual according to their experience or capability. People will always have wider capabilities than those they apply in any given situation.

A tool for conversations, not audits: We anticipate that not everyone will agree on what capabilities are needed in any situation. This a tool to support conversation and reflection, rather than a definitive audit of needs. To move beyond the limits of our own perspective we hope to use this tool to guide conversations with clients and other stakeholders to gain a clearer, consensual view of what is needed.

Developing the Capabilities Model has helped us surface the fact that we already draw on a very wide range of knowledge and skills at SMK. For example, in Phase One of the Power Project, SMK staff brought capabilities in relationship building, convening, communication and research, as well as knowledge of the 'big picture' in civil society. Members of the Core Learning Group and wider Community of Practice brought communication and research skills, as well as knowledge of specific communities and social issues, and of engaging with social sector organisations – including engaging with the project itself. All brought personal reflection and self-awareness, and a commitment to equity and social justice.

It is, of course, important to remember that each of these people brought additional capabilities that benefitted the project – or had all sorts of capabilities they did not bring – deriving from their lived, learned and professional experience.

Reflections on the limitations of this model

We have developed this model in response to feedback on an earlier version. However, some of the feedback we received remains difficult for us to fully reconcile. We are sharing here for further reflection and discussion.

Is it possible to develop a person-centred approach, that begins with the capabilities of the person who hopes to be involved rather than the needs of the organisation?

We feel very drawn to the idea of being 'person-centred' in this work and designing opportunities for collaboration based on the capabilities of the people around us. However, we have two initial concerns.

Firstly, beginning with the people around us is likely result in us working with those that are already close to us. This could be a barrier to us actively continuing to seek out diverse views and perspectives beyond a close circle.

Secondly, the reality for us is that SMK is accountable to funders and clients to deliver a project or brief, agreed in consultation with them. While this continues to be the case, we cannot see a way of designing a truly person-centred approach to developing our work. We remain open to discussion.

Will a Capabilities Model developed within a social sector organisation reproduce the same limiting ideas around the capabilities needed for social change – ideas organisations may need to ‘unlearn’ at least as much as those outside of organisations need to ‘learn’ them?

Yes. For now, we intend to mitigate this and challenge our own assumptions by applying the principle that the Capabilities Model is a tool for reflection and conversation, rather than a definitive audit. We will actively seek out views of stakeholders in deciding which capabilities are required for a specific project or programme of work.

We acknowledge that this requires further thought and would welcome the opportunity to learn with and from others.