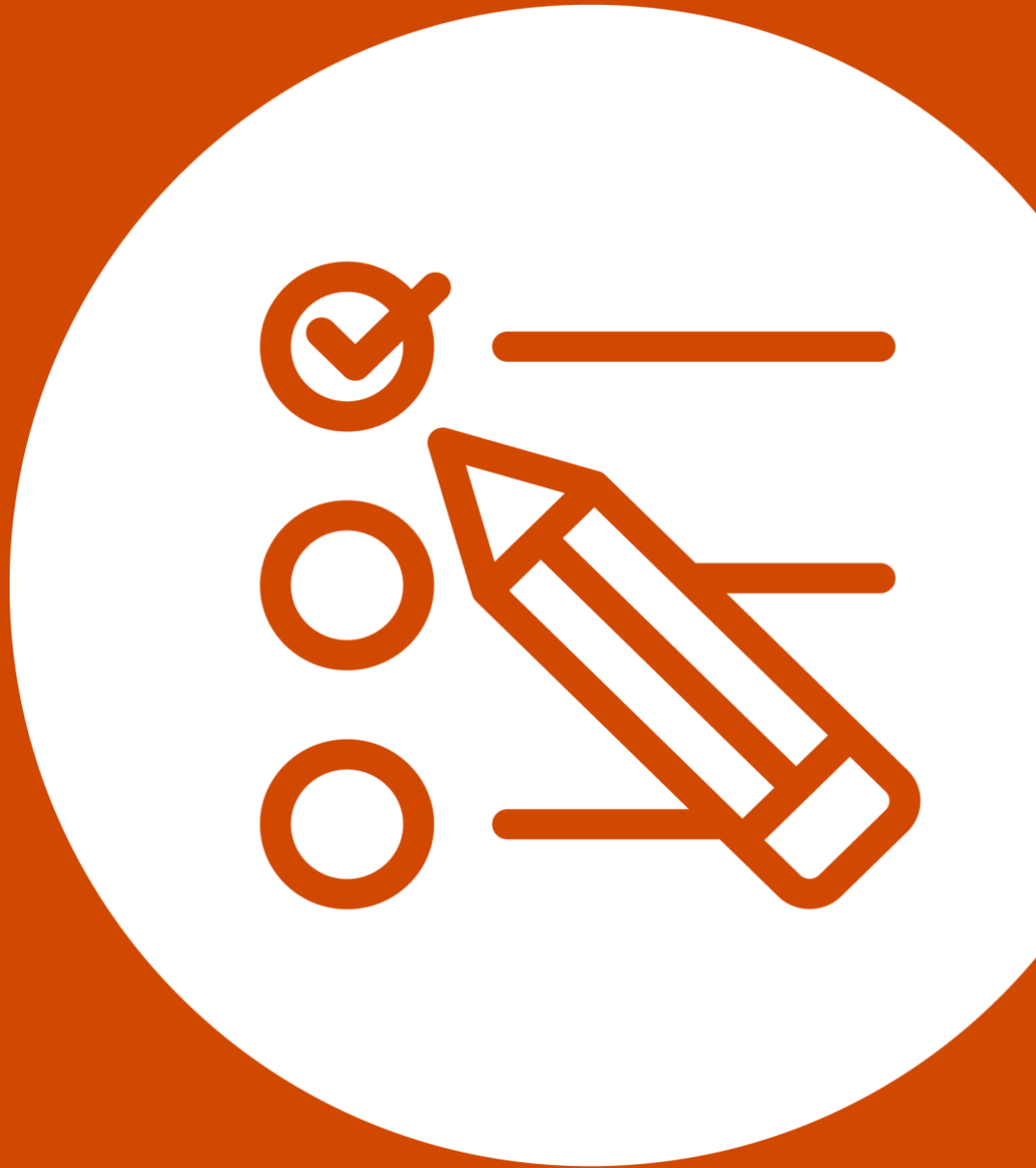


# Learning

about programme design



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# 1. Introduction

Solidarity in Social Change is a five-year programme delivered by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK) and funded by Oak Foundation for the UK Housing and Homelessness programme grantee partners. The programme aims to build the knowledge, skills and confidence of Oak Foundation's UK partners to work more closely with people with first-hand experience of housing inequalities in their campaigns for social change.

## About the programme

This programme is all about building organisations' capacity to work alongside people whose experience may be very different to their own. So, this programme is all about learning. It is a long-term initiative that includes both traditional training opportunities and inquiry-led learning, based on principles of action research.

As hosts, we at SMK are interested in how we learn, as much as what we are learning. We think this is vital if we are to learn to work together when our experiences and ideas might be very different.

## About this report

This report is a summary of our approach to delivering the pilot year of the programme. It includes what we have learned about the difference it is making to participants, as well as what we ourselves are learning through this process. Our intention is to be as transparent as possible, because we think this might hold value for others.

All quotes are from participants on the programme, but we have been careful to protect their anonymity as we embark on this learning journey together. We are grateful to their generosity and commitment to learning alongside us.

We are also carefully documenting insights that are emerging from the programme to deepen our understanding of the challenges and possibilities that arise from working in deeper solidarity in social change. These insights are recorded in our report *Year One Insights about Solidarity*.

**“My advice would be to come with an open mind. At the start it felt a bit daunting, and I wasn't too sure what to say or when to say it. Over the sessions I learned that it's important to ask the question you need to ask. It's your space to explore your own questions about this work. It will give you a completely new perspective.”**

## 2. What is Solidarity in Social Change?

Solidarity in social change is a commitment to standing together in the face of inequality and working together to tackle it. This commitment arises from our belief that, when people make change together, it makes for better decisions, stronger communities and more powerful social change. For more about SMK's approach to solidarity in social change, see our guide [It's All About Power](#).

### Why solidarity in social change?

Those who are most directly affected by social issues are, too often, excluded from attempts to address them. Charities and other formal social sector organisations do not typically reflect the communities they exist to serve. And knowledge gained through 'lived' or direct first-hand experience is overlooked or undervalued against that learned through professional or academic means.

This must change. Yet it is also true that responsibility for social change cannot rest solely on the shoulders of those on the sharp end of broken, unequal social systems.

Opportunities for solidarity exist between those with different backgrounds and experiences – including between those working in professional social change roles and those with first-hand experience of the issues they seek to address. But attempts to work together can feel hollow or tokenistic if they don't pay attention to power. Understanding our own power, and using it more consciously, is key to creating more diverse and equitable organisations and key to working alongside people whose experience may be very different to our own.

We believe learning to work together – in deeper solidarity – for social change is hard, but it is a critical challenge of our times.

### Our vision for the programme

Our vision for this programme is that Oak UK's partners have the capacity and capability to create change in solidarity with people with first-hand experience of housing injustice.

Learning from the programme strengthens UK civil society to do the same, across a range of social issues.

### Aims of the programme

SMK brings our analysis of power, solidarity & social change, and our own experience of training, capacity building and convening for change. But we know we do not have all the answers.

We aim to bring all kinds of expertise from across the partnership to light, and build solidarity through the process, as well as the content, of our conversations. This means:

- Supporting Oak partners to learn from each other & from practice
- Deepening understanding of what it means to work in solidarity for social change together
- Sharing learning to strengthen the partnership – and wider civil society

**“What’s great about this programme is it gives you space to step back and reflect on how you approach your role, rather than just telling you what to do. This is lifelong work but the only thing that really makes the difference... It’s vital to take time to explore this. Otherwise, what kind of leaders will we be?”**

### 3. What did we do?

As a Pilot Programme, much of our learning from our first year focused on understanding 'what works and what doesn't?' when it comes to designing and delivering the programme. Our intention is to continue to listen, reflect and apply our learning to refine our approach.

#### Listening to Oak's partners

We began by speaking to people in a range of roles and organisations, to understand their approach to social change, how they work with people with first-hand experience of housing inequality, and what they need to strengthen their work.

People told us they would like the programme to:

- Develop their understanding of power and social change
- Help them to develop organisational structures and systems to support working more closely with people with first-hand experience
- Help them strengthen participation in their campaigns, advocacy and change strategies
- Build an evidence base of why this is important, and what works
- Provide shared spaces for learning, reflection and dialogue

People made recommendations for the programme design, which included:

- Opportunities for structured learning with practical tools and frameworks
- Opportunities for reflection, dialogue and creative learning
- Support to embed learning in their organisation, through coaching, mentoring or consultancy
- A budget to access learning from other providers

Not all the people we spoke to took part in the first year of the programme. Those that did asked for:

- Simple communications and accessible platforms
- A flexible approach, with different levels of participation
- A mix of training and reflective spaces
- Support with influencing their own organisations

## The pilot year

Our pilot year responded to what we'd heard about the need for flexibility, and for both training and reflective spaces. Alongside this, we designed processes for us to begin to capture what we were learning about solidarity in social change. The programme contained the following elements:

### Discovery sessions

Online sessions to introduce people to our content and approach.

**22 people from 16 organisations attended at least one online discovery session.**

### Conversation starters

Online training sessions to introduce participants to SMK's analysis of power, solidarity and social change. The aim was to introduce tools to help participants to start a conversation about these concepts in their organisation.

**23 people from 20 organisations attended one or more of our series of three workshops.**

### Deepening practice

Some participants committed to joining a three-month process. Taking an 'action learning' approach, we supported them to identify inquiry questions related to challenges they faced in their work. We convened an in-person day and three online sessions for three groups, where participants coached each other and shared insights.

**18 people from 15 organisations joined an Inquiry Group.**

### Connect and amplify

We set up a Solidarity in Social Change email group, as an online platform for Oak Foundation's partners to support and share. We expect it will take time for engagement to grow. Some participants have set up smaller online groups of their own.

**39 people from 22 organisations signed up to our e-newsletter.**

## Developing our approach to learning

Solidarity in Social Change is a flexible, responsive programme working with complex issues. Our own approach to learning reflects that. We are observing, reflecting and adapting as we go.

Rather than adopt a traditional approach to evaluation, we have developed learning questions linked to our theory of change that help us make sense of information across three levels:

### Impact of working in solidarity

There is a strong ethical imperative to including people with first-hand experience in social change strategies, but grantees have asked us to help build an evidence base for impact and effectiveness. It is too soon to respond to this question, but we are beginning to build this into the programme.

**Are organisations' social change strategies more effective when they work in solidarity with people with first-hand experience?**

### Outcomes

There are two levels of outcomes. The first relates to the difference that participating in the pilot programme is making to participants and organisations (this is explored below).

**What difference is the programme making to participants' and organisations' capacity to work in solidarity in social change?**

The second relates to the insights that are emerging about working in solidarity, through the programme (these are explored in our companion report, *Insights about Solidarity*).

**Are participants able to identify critical questions about their work and find solutions for these questions?**

### Outputs

This relates to what we are learning about delivering the programme, and how we are adapting (details of this are included below).

**What's working and what do we need to change to deliver an effective programme?**



## Principles guiding our learning

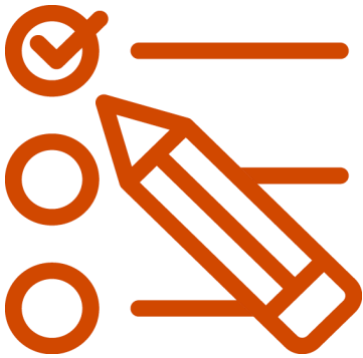
Our learning framework includes a set of guiding principles, which are applied in a practical way to inform how we gather data, deliver the programme and make sense of what we are seeing. These principles are evolving as we learn more about solidarity, both in social change and in our approach to learning.

- **Power-aware participation:** Does this process involve the right people? How might we be excluding people? How are we interrogating our assumptions?
- **Diversity:** Does our approach recognise and support diverse ways of knowing?
- **Minimal jargon:** Is it clear and simple?
- **Kindness:** Is feedback kind and supportive?
- **Moving at the speed of trust:** Have we invested enough in relationships?
- **Grace and utility:** Are we holding these principles in balance with the need for pragmatism and action? What will help us move on together?

## Gathering data

We are learning alongside participants on the programme. At each of the conversations we convene, we gather insights, reflections and stories from participants. Our role is to use these insights to build the bigger picture of what we are learning together.

We also interview participants to help us understand the difference we are making and gather quantitative data about the people we are reaching. We use our learning questions to analyse and synthesise learning, inform next steps and develop an evidence base for solidarity in social change.



## 4. What are we learning?

Early outcomes are emerging for participants, including increased confidence, the value of prioritising time to connect and reflect with others who bring diverse perspectives.

In terms of programme delivery, we are learning that we need to communicate more clearly, and balance flexibility with structure, and spaces for reflection with tangible knowledge and practical skills. We also need to bring more diverse voices into the programme and provide some support specifically to people at the start of their career with first-hand experience of housing injustice themselves.

We are taking all these things into account in the design of Year Two, and future years of the programme.



## Learning outcomes for participants

We are at the very start of a five-year programme, but early insights are emerging about the difference the programme is making to participants.

### **Confidence is increasing.**

Having dedicated time to think together, articulate challenges and be part of a group with shared challenges and a shared commitment, is improving participants' confidence. People told us how reassuring they found it to know they are not alone in grappling with issues of solidarity and participation in their work.

**“Reflecting and thinking objectively has helped me gain confidence in my new role.”**

**“It is reassuring to hear others grappling with the same issues – it builds confidence. It felt like a safe and collegiate space.”**

Participants also reported that they were able to see more clearly the strengths that already exist in their organisation, or their own practice, that they could build on.

**“I am learning how hard to push and when to push. Some nervousness about how much to do and when. But there are some parts of the service that are participatory and well-formed already.”**

**“I realised that I've tried a lot, some things have definitely gone better than they would have done before.”**

### **Spaces for connection and reflection matter.**

The space for shared connection and reflection has been significant – the greatest value reported by participants so far. This has strengthened our commitment to ensuring these spaces are at the heart of the programme, not an added extra.

**“The strength [of this approach] is the connection to others.”**

**“Really helpful. Always good to meet and hear about how different organisations are doing things to bring about change.”**

The Oak partnership is UK-wide, so most of the programme is online. We trialled an in-person event, and participants reported that this space to connect with others from across the partnership was of real value.



**“It was an amazing experience. I’m looking forward to working with the group.”**

Those who committed to joining an Inquiry Group reported a deepening of relationships and greater buy-in for the programme. Participants told us the groups felt safe and collegiate, and fellow participants offered generous listening and support.

**“I enjoy having space for myself. My workload is huge - so having something I enjoy has refreshed me a little.”**

**“A clean uninterrupted space is rare and powerful.”**

For some, participation in an Inquiry Group has catalysed them to make connections and keep in touch beyond the spaces we have provided.

#### **Tangible knowledge and skills are important.**

The Conversation Starter workshops covered a lot of ground to get people up to speed with SMK’s key tools for understanding power and solidarity, and campaigning and social change. This was a useful start to some.

**“Great to start thinking about these big issues.”**

Others found it quite abstract, perhaps coming as it did at the start of the programme. Some hoped for more practical guidance.

**“I would like to see more mix between theory and practical. I loved chatting about ideas, but if there is something more practical, I could think about how to apply it.”**

Participants gained practical knowledge from committing to the Inquiry Groups, including tips derived from others’ experience and shared resources. However, more significant was how the peer coaching approach helped develop knowledge entirely relevant to participants’ work.

**“This is the stuff that gets pushed down the list but, if you make a commitment, you definitely feel the benefit of it.”**

**“With a longer process, there’s an opportunity to build. I did a lot of thinking in three sessions about big questions. You can cover more ground, cover different aspects.”**



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### **There is value (and challenge) in learning from diverse perspectives.**

A key commitment of the programme is to reveal and celebrate the rich knowledge and expertise that exists across the partnership. Bringing together organisations working with the same aim, but from very different perspectives, has been a success.

**“The geographical spread of participants means we’re not in direct competition for funding, so barriers are down. We can talk more openly.”**

Participants of Inquiry Groups agree that hearing and supporting other people’s questions and explorations is helpful for their own. Even apparently unrelated issues offered a new perspective on their own challenges.

**“It’s useful to hear the questions of others – raises questions that I should be thinking about but haven’t yet.”**

**“The Inquiry Groups help you get a greater awareness of the wider context. I’m getting in the flow and thinking about the value I can bring to others. We quickly go in-depth.”**

The groups brought people together from different roles and positions in their respective organisations – from strategic oversight to frontline engagement. Participants told us that being with people with a very different experience of organisational life, in a safe space outside of their organisations, helped them to challenge their assumptions and see the bigger picture.

**“Hearing challenges from more junior people in the group has impacted on my understanding of how much power I have and what I can do differently.”**

**“The [broad] thematic nature of the cohorts has enabled me to think on a much bigger strategic scale about what’s needed for housing and homelessness. Where we can connect the dots, and what’s holding staff at different levels back.”**

However, more groups organised around a specific theme may be of value for some, and is something for us to consider as the programme develops:

**“I really enjoyed the sessions... but because the people in my group came from quite different areas, it was difficult to get into a conversation that helped me along with my inquiry.”**



## Learning outcomes for organisations

It's encouraging to hear that the programme is making a positive difference to participants, but supporting individual staff from organisations is not enough. Our aim is to strengthen organisations across Oak Foundation's partnership – as well as the sector at large.

It is too soon to say with confidence whether we are making a difference beyond the individuals who are involved so far. We know some participants have significant strategic influence in their roles. Some in less senior roles have the full support of their organisation to implement change. However, others identify that a key challenge is influencing colleagues to recognise the need to work in this way.

Some committed programme participants from Year One have now left their organisation. They may have taken insights into new roles in the sector, but we do not know the extent to which what they learned made a difference to an organisation in the Oak partnership.

Perhaps the most significant outcome for organisations so far has been participants applying the principles and process of collaborative, reflective learning they experience on the programme within their teams and organisations.

**“I've already been able to put some stuff into practice following our action learning trial run.”**

In addition, participants have told us they have:

- Introduced SMK's tools for navigating power and social change to colleagues
- Felt more confident to hold conversations with colleagues about power and solidarity
- Introduced reflective spaces and Action Learning-based approaches to support learning with their teams
- Applied learning from the programme to help them to clarify expectations with the communities they work with and navigate difficult situations
- Begun thinking differently about how they can influence funders



## Learning about programme delivery

As this year was a pilot programme, we intended to speak to as many people as possible across the partnership about their needs, experiment with different approaches and build the programme as we go. This led to some logistical challenges for the programme, but to some rich learning for us about the design of the programme going forwards.

### **We need to communicate more clearly.**

Communication has been our major challenge in this first year of the programme, in terms of how we communicate the vision of the programme, how we communicate opportunities for participation and, in fact, how we reach participants to tell them about what we're doing.

We have struggled to be clear enough about the vision and aims of the programme, or its intended outcomes for participants.

The language of power, solidarity and lived experience can mean different things to different people. It can be challenging to find a common language that is simple and engages a wide range of audiences.

**“The language used was very buzzwordy. People didn't seem to understand what the groups were about until they were described as peer-to-peer coaching.”**

We prioritised flexibility in programme design, as that is what we heard partners needed. Without a clear online hub to signpost people to, this made it very difficult to communicate what was on offer.

We had to rely heavily on Oak Foundation to share programme information and put us in touch with our fellow grantee partners. It is taking time to gather our own database of people interested in the programme within the organisations across the partnership.

## Year Two: What will we do differently?

Some of these difficulties are a natural consequence of building a programme in 'real time', but there are some clear actions for us in Year Two:

- Clarify how we communicate the vision of solidarity in social change
- Simplify our language and continue to seek feedback
- Create a digital hub for the programme on the SMK website, with news, insights, and links to sign up to events all in one place
- Improve our digital communications, with content in different formats including video



### **We need to balance flexibility and structure in programme design.**

We learned a lot from hosting a flexible and responsive Pilot Programme. But being too flexible can make it harder for participants to understand what we are offering, how they can get involved, and the outcomes they can expect.

We are learning about the need to balance a more emergent, adaptable approach with a more clearly structured programme. But this balance isn't always easy to get right.

For example, our intention for Year Two was to ask people to sign up to a more straightforward cohort-based programme. However, we heard this would be a barrier to some people staying involved.

For some participants, a regular monthly commitment is too much. While for others, it doesn't feel like enough.

**“I struggled to find time to give the Inquiry Groups my all, which doesn't feel fair on the rest of the participants.”**

We will continue to reflect and build in new opportunities as we go, but have invested time in process design, in setting dates and commitments further in advance, and in creating a digital hub to hold everything in one place. We hope this will stand us in good stead for Year Two and beyond.

## **Year Two: What will we do differently?**

We will continue to offer multiple levels of engagement in the programme, and to listen to what Oak partners tell us they need. For Year Two, that means:

- Creating a more structured timeline and better communication of events
- Hold Inquiry Groups less frequently
- Maintain regular opportunities for new participants to drop into an event
- Optimise opportunities to talk about learning online, so those that don't have time to take part in events can still benefit from learning from the programme
- Continue to seek feedback, including from those who haven't yet taken part, about what changes we can make to ensure we meets their needs





## **We need to balance training and inquiry, theory and practice, to ensure relevance.**

Different people and organisations have different learning needs and preferences. There is no right or wrong way to learn, but we will continue to explore this tension and offer opportunities to suit a range of needs and interests.

SMK bring a range of tools to help campaigners hold a broad view of social change and develop confidence and a shared language around solidarity and first-hand experience. Some people would like more of this kind of practical, skills-based teaching and learning.

### **“Practical guides and tools would help influence my organisation – it would help put stuff into practice.”**

For others, the primary value of the programme is the opportunity to learn from each other. Not everyone is grappling with immediate, tangible challenges, some are trying to shift their organisation’s culture or their own approach. For them, an inquiry-led approach to exploring issues together is more useful.

### **“I appreciate the value of asking questions rather than telling.”**

At times, this tension arose within spaces on the programme. For example, some people have needed time to reflect in sessions intended for practical learning, others have prioritised offering concrete solutions in spaces intended for reflective, coaching style questions.

There is much more we’d like to do. For example, we would like to do more to support participants to bring their learning into their organisations, and to find ways for Oak partners to access relevant learning outside the programme that they can share with us all.

## **Year Two: What will we do differently?**

We will continue to talk openly about the possibilities afforded by both tangible skills-based learning and reflective inquiry-led learning. In addition, we will:

- Offer alternate, bimonthly opportunities for skills-based workshops and facilitated peer-led learning, to meet different learning needs and preferences
- Bring experts in practice and, where possible, experts by experience into our workshops to balance theory with practice
- Begin compiling an online learning hub, including digital resources, to support participants to introduce concepts colleagues
- Ask participants what kind of support they need to bring learning to colleagues, and trial an approach
- Share blogs and case studies online to share learning more widely



### **We need to bring more diverse voices into the programme.**

Our work on this programme is primarily with individuals within organisations, rather than with people and communities with first-hand experience of homelessness outside of organisations. But we know this boundary is often blurred – particularly in some of the most innovative organisations.

We welcome staff and volunteers who themselves have first-hand experience of housing inequality on the programme, but only a handful have joined us so far. We think simplifying and improving our communication will help.

We would like to do more to directly support staff and volunteers with first-hand experience to develop their campaigning skills. We recognise that investing in people at the start of their campaigning career is a vital expression of solidarity.

We have also noted a visible lack of racial diversity on the programme, particularly among participants who committed to the Inquiry Groups. We don't yet know why. It may relate to the diversity of organisations on the partnership, to our challenges around communication, or to a mismatch between our offer and the needs of some organisations.

## **Year Two: What will we do differently?**

Reaching diverse organisations, including those led by people with first-hand experience of housing and other forms of inequality is a key objective, and we are prioritising understanding this issue this year. We will:

- Improve monitoring systems to track who we are (and aren't) reaching
- Improve our communications, and use a range of methods including video to communicate our ideas more accessibly
- Reach out to organisations led by minoritised groups for a conversation about how we can best meet their needs
- Provide two free places on each of SMK's Campaign Carousel programmes for early career staff and volunteers, who may themselves have first-hand experience of housing inequalities, in small to medium-sized Oak funded organisations.



## Learning about working together

Our core delivery team includes SMK staff, freelance facilitators, and a learning specialist. We invested time and energy into building trusting relationships within this team at the start of the programme. We saw this as vital for developing a way of working that reflects our vision and principles. We are learning a great deal from this process, some of which we think reflects the process of solidarity in social change.

### **Investing in relationships is continual and takes time and mutual understanding.**

We intentionally put together a delivery team which includes people with diverse backgrounds and experiences. We invested a great deal of time establishing principles for learning and working together and a common vision for the programme. This was a rewarding process, which stood us in good stead when it came to moving into delivery mode. But in the rush to meet deadlines, it has at times been hard to maintain the quality of care and trust we prioritised at the start.

We have struggled, at times, to manage the tension between having staff paid to think about this work as part of their day-to-day work, and freelancers who feel a strong sense of ownership and commitment but are paid by the day. Budgets are tight. We made the decision to avoid using language such as 'co-design' as that set up unclear expectations, but to strike a balance - between what is practical and affordable with what is desirable, and between the different needs of staff within organisations and freelance partners. Clear communication has been key.

We have experienced some changes in the freelance part of the team, entirely understandable when people are juggling workloads and uncertain contracts. Investment in the team has not gone to waste - those that continue have helped to set a culture for the group as it welcomes new members, but further time and effort is required to bring others on board.

### **Embedding processes and structures helps build culture.**

Our early efforts to prioritise ways of working focused on building relationships for learning. The programme was emergent, so our processes for working together were emergent too. At times, this led to a high level of uncertainty – and sometimes anxiety – for team members. It led to a culture of urgency, as we rushed to complete tasks on time. Developing timelines for events in advance, overlaid with clear cycles of learning will, we hope, help to create greater clarity and balance for the team, which in turn will, we hope, benefit our working culture.

### **Accepting change, and an ongoing commitment to trust, is part of the process.**

We think we are building strong, trusting and valued relationships with those people who have engaged the most in the programme. We have spoken to many others – during our initial consultations, at our events, and as part of our evaluation process at the end of Year One. The nature of the programme means we need to accept that relationships will change. New organisations – and staff – will join the partnership, others will leave. Our own Programme officer at Oak has changed, and we have had to work hard to develop a new relationship here.



Keeping people with us as we develop the vision and shared values of the programme is a challenge that reflects the challenge of solidarity in social change itself.

## Learning about accountability

During our Pilot Year, as we tested different approaches and started to build the programme, we have prioritised learning over evaluation and accountability. We had to begin with a set of assumptions that we could test, to design the first iteration of the programme.

Going forward, we are thinking more about accountability – while still being guided by our learning principles and questions. We have started to design a clearer Theory of Change to track the ways in which the programme makes a difference. We will continue to seek out ways to involve participants more in the design of the programme, without imposing an unrealistic burden of time.

We're ambitious. We see our accountabilities as lying with Oak Foundation and partners on the UK Housing and Homelessness programme, but also with the people you work with and with the wider sector. We want to make a difference to the lives of people who face housing injustice, and we think we're on to something that could help influence the way the wider social sector works to campaign for social change.

We will continue to capture emerging insights about solidarity in social change and to develop an evidence base with practical examples and deep-dive case studies. We will also continue to document our own learning about what it means to deliver a learning and capacity building programme that truly values diverse forms of knowledge for solidarity in social change.

### **About SMK**

SMK is here for people working to make lasting change, whether in their community, across society, or for our planet. We grow knowledge and confidence by sharing the latest social change thinking and advice. We connect the campaign community to grow solidarity, share ideas, and find common cause. And we act as a powerful champion for the right to campaign as part of a healthy democracy.



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