

Insights

about working in solidarity



**Solidarity in
Social Change**

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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 seeks to build the knowledge, skills and confidence of Oak's UK partners to work more closely with people with first-hand experience of housing inequalities in their campaigns for social change.

We believe that our efforts to drive social change are more powerful when we work together, and that strategies are more effective when they include people directly affected by social issues.

About this report

We are carefully documenting conversations from the programme to deepen our understanding of the challenges and opportunities that participants face. So far, several themes have emerged which we believe have wider relevance for those seeking to understand what helps, and what hinders, deeper solidarity in campaigns and social change strategies.

This report includes a summary of insights emerging from the first year of the Solidarity in Social Change programme. 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.

To find out more about the programme, outcomes from participants and what we are learning about delivering it, please see *Year One Learning about Programme Design*.

“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?”



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.¹ This commitment arises from our belief that, when people make change together, it makes for better decisions, stronger communities and more powerful social change.

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.

Making sense of solidarity in social change

All the participants of this programme are working within organisations, alongside people and communities, to drive wider social change in housing injustice and homelessness. This means all are working within complex systems. Many different relationship, structures and expectations are at play that affect not only the outcome of the work, but how people can go about their work.

Part of our role, as hosts of the programme, is to help participants see more clearly the different issues that help or hinder efforts towards working more closely with people and communities with first-hand experience. We believe this is the first step to mapping a path towards change.

We find it helpful to think in terms of ‘nested systems’ to disentangle those complex, interconnected issues.

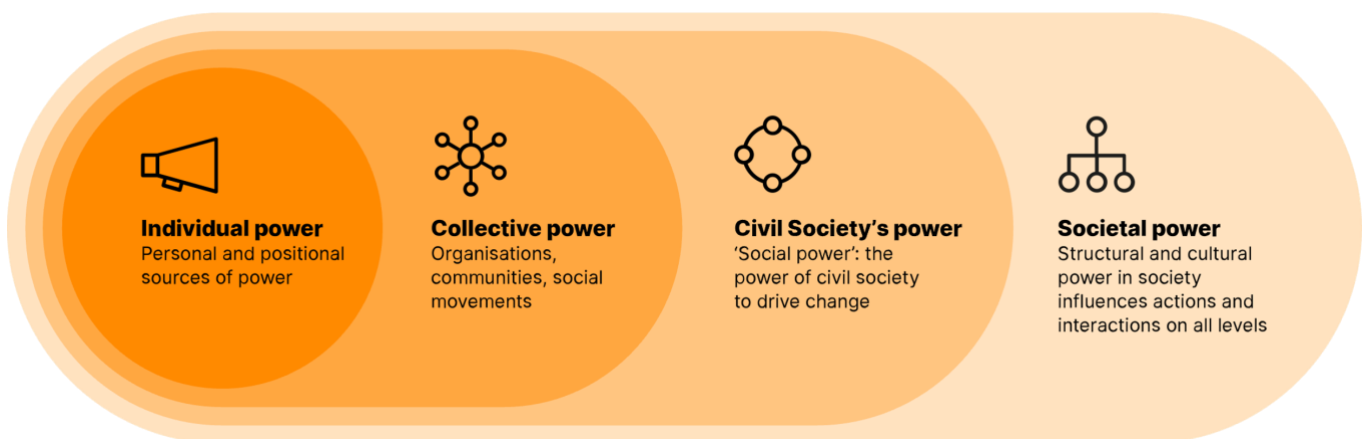
¹ See SMK’s guide *It’s All About Power* (2021) for more about solidarity in social change



Some challenges and opportunities participants face are very personal or individual, while some relate to the collective strategies, cultures and processes of their organisations. Other factors are beyond the scope of the organisation – the requirements and expectations of the network of other organisations and institutions in the sector, including funders, who are also working to drive change. Also at play, always, are the wider systems, structures and cultural norms of power and inequality that we are all a part of in society at large.

The Power Lens

The Power Lens is a visual representation of these nested systems, that can help make sense of these complex, interconnected issues. We call this tool the Power Lens to remind us that there is power – both to resist and to create change – at each level of this nested system.



In this report, we will organise the questions and insights emerging on the Solidarity in Social Change programme according to these nested spheres: the individual, the collective, civil society and society. At each level we explore the questions participants are grappling with and the insights that are emerging, and ask 'what can be done?' – what power exists to affect change toward deeper solidarity in social change?

For more about the Power Lens, see SMK's guide, [It's All About Power](#).



3. What questions are people grappling with?

During our pilot year, we helped participants articulate more clearly the questions they are grappling with.

“We won't reach the answers, but we can practise the art of asking better questions!”

Programme participants come from a range of roles, some with strategic oversight of their organisations, others with frontline responsibilities. The range of questions people brought to our conversations reflects this diversity of perspective.

Each question was chosen because it was relevant to an individual's work, but many also held resonance for the wider group. Each, in different ways, relates closely to the theme of working in deeper solidarity in social change.

Individual

Some questions speak to the very real personal, individual challenges people face in trying to do this work, whatever their role or level:

“How can I overcome feeling isolated, as someone who advocated for my organisation to take participation seriously, and is now responsible for its success?”

“How can I cope with the stress of this work in the face of a worsening political climate?”

Collective

Lots of questions relate to the structures, cultures and strategies that determine how people within organisations work together, and the ways in which these can enable or constrain efforts to work meaningfully with people with first-hand experience.

Within this category, some questions relate to tangible, practical challenges about processes and systems. These may have clear solutions, although not necessarily easily reached:

“How can I create a case management system that can be easily used by people with first-hand experience of housing injustice?”

“How can I create a first-hand experience campaign group that manages itself, rather than needing to be held?”



Other questions relate to the relationships and cultures that form when people work together:

“How can I manage relationships between staff with/without first-hand experience of housing injustice?”

“Understanding the ‘lived experience ceiling’: How far can the career of someone with first-hand experience go after their first role?”

Yet more questions relate to organisation-wide strategy and, for example, whether working closely with people with first-hand experience is a means to achieving a strategy, or integral to the strategy itself:

“How far is our ‘power with’ work embedded into our social policy work? Or is it a strategy aim in its own right?”

Civil society and the sector

Some people have brought questions relating to the constraints of working as part of wider civil society and the social sector, for example the expectations imposed by funders:

“How do you communicate to funders and senior leaders that if you are meaningfully going to involve people you aren’t going to get as many people in the process?”

Wider society:

Some concerns respond to the challenges of working in the current wider social and political context:

“How can I make systemic change, rather than just rehabilitating people who faced homelessness and reintegrating them into a system that failed them?”

None of these questions are more or less important than another. Together, they build a picture of the complexity and challenge people face in their efforts to work in deeper solidarity for social change.



4. What insights are emerging?

Participants on the programme have spoken openly about the specific challenges and opportunities they face in working more closely with people with first-hand experience of housing injustice in their campaigning and change strategies.

Together, we are building a more nuanced picture of what working in deeper solidarity in social change really entails.

We do not yet have clear answers for all the questions people are grappling with, but some insights are emerging that we think have value for anyone committed to working in this way – whatever issues they are seeking to address.



Individuals: Care and leadership

So far, we have worked with individual participants on the programme, rather than whole teams. They represent a range of roles, from Campaign and Participation Officers to Heads of Policy and Engagement, to CEOs.

Without exception, participants recognise the power they have to make a difference to people's lives. They take this responsibility extremely seriously and are committed to working in a way that is sensitive, responsive and accountable to those they work with. They invest significant time, care and attention in their work, often going above and beyond and giving more of themselves than you might expect to a professional role.

But they are tired, and deeply concerned about causing harm in their pursuit of change.

Prioritising care

The first year of the programme has confirmed that building open, trusting relationships is the single most important ingredient for working well with people with first-hand experience. Building such relationships allows each of us to go beyond assumptions and stereotypes, and better understand and support each other's needs and aspirations.

“It's about how to tell when the person you're working with is uncomfortable – we're creating agency by supporting people to know how to step in and how to ask.”

Personal relationships can help build trust between communities and an entire organisation, helping people to give of their best so they can fully contribute, and creating conditions to support forgiveness when things go wrong.

But the burden of developing and maintaining strong relationships can sit heavily on the shoulders of individual staff members. If those relationships flounder, it can lead to a breakdown of trust, disappointment and hurt for all concerned. Staff worry that if they leave an organisation or a project this could have serious negative consequences, both for the work and for those they work with.

“I worry about the relationships I'm building being lost when I move on.”

When work is going well, participants report a high degree of job satisfaction, strong relationships with both colleagues and partners, and a real sense of purpose. But this deep investment has a shadow side. At least one participant mentioned the 'saviour complex' that exists in the sector. Prioritising the time to reflect on personal motivations and implications of the role is important.



“In this sector, your job is who you are to an extent. It’s hard to build spaces to hold vulnerability into your role.”

When things are not going well, it can lead to a deeply felt personal sense of responsibility. Participants know that mistakes can have real and potentially serious consequences. This can lead to an understandable lack of confidence or concern about causing harm to others.

“I’ve had some difficult experiences - I’m worried about re-traumatising with conversations.”

We heard many stories of people feeling exhausted, angry, and close to burn out – perhaps exacerbated by a blurred boundary between the personal and professional. There is a clear need for participants to prioritise care for themselves and colleagues, as well as with those they work with.

“What pressure are you placing on yourself? It’s crucial to take care of yourself if you want to help others.”

Individuals can and do have the power to make a difference, but without adequate support this will come at a cost to them.

The role of leadership

We, at SMK, believe in the capacity of individuals and groups of all kinds to affect change – each of us has personal as well as positional power. We designed this programme with the assumption that anyone can take a lead and champion solidarity within their organisation, whatever their role.

Having seen for ourselves the determination and passion that participants are bringing to their work, we are holding on to this belief. However, we are more keenly aware of the challenges people face in trying to affect change within their organisations, as well as in society at large. In organisations with traditional hierarchical structures, leadership buy-in makes all the difference to this work.

Some organisations in the partnership are led by people with first-hand experience of housing and other injustices or have organisation-wide strategies for meaningfully involving them. Some participants on this programme are in leadership positions within organisations and are committed to making this shift.

However, for some participants a key challenge is raising awareness within their organisation and influencing colleagues and senior leaders to adopt a more participatory approach. For some, this means persuading colleagues of the value of involving people with first-hand experience in a campaign. For others, it might mean managing risk, or breaking down binary assumptions about success and failure.



“People feel that either it all has to work, or it will never work.”

We are keen to do more to help participants raise awareness within their organisations and to work more closely with a small group of organisations in the partnership, to learn more about developing organisation-wide capacity so we can share that learning with others.

What can individuals do?

Practical things individuals can do include:

- Manage expectations. Be clear about the time and resource required to build trusting relationships with the people and communities you work with.
- Set realistic professional boundaries and support colleagues to do the same.
- Recognise, and champion, the need to take care of yourself and colleagues, as well as the people you work with outside the organisation.
- Prioritise spaces for debrief, reflection, and time away from frontline work. Find a colleague to be a sounding board, or if you are in a leadership role create systems to support this.
- Think about what you can do to take a lead. Bring conversations about solidarity to the table or ask a supportive ally to bring them on your behalf.
- Seek out supportive colleagues, particularly if you don't have the support of leaders. Work together to influence change in your organisation – don't try and do it all yourself.
- If you're a leader, support staff to develop the confidence and leadership skills to champion solidarity and help keep the conversation constructive and on the agenda.
- Find opportunities to connect with trusted allies in different organisations to share reflections without concern for organisational politics – like this community!



Collective: Organisational culture, processes and strategy

The cultures, strategies, systems and processes that define and determine organisational life can either enable or constrain attempts to work meaningfully alongside people with first-hand experience.

Culture

Organisational culture is complex. It includes the routines, stories and assumptions that determine what is valued in an organisation, how resources are allocated, and who feels they belong. As such, culture can strengthen – or inadvertently undermine – an ambition to work in solidarity.

We have come to see the work of shifting organisational culture as key to supporting solidarity in social change. For example, if a culture prioritises quantity of relationships over quality, this can lead to resources being diverted away from what matters most – as well as placing unfair expectations on staff and risking efforts to work with people with first-hand experience being experienced as tokenistic.

Shifting organisational culture is a slow process, involving making assumptions and values visible and developing new working processes and practices. It requires clear leadership, shared responsibility, and reflective action. We heard that whether or not participants trust in their organisation's capacity and willingness for cultural change makes a significant difference to how they feel about their work.

A culture of trust and solidarity does not happen by chance. Culture is closely linked to leadership, but it is also directly related to capacity. It is not always easy to maintain within the urgency and busy schedules of a social change organisation. When capacity is limited, culture suffers.

“I don't have much support. I have a wonderful team, but my line manager is so busy.”

Systems and processes

Organisational systems and processes can help or hinder participants' efforts to work closely with people with first-hand experience. For example, we heard frustration that data-gathering processes can feel burdensome or impenetrable to people already managing complex situations, or that limited resources can prevent staff from taking the time to develop meaningful relationships.

While some processes are rightly contextual, and specific to different organisations, some common themes have emerged. For example, when involving people with first-hand experience in organisational meetings it is essential to be prepared and to prepare them, and to set clear boundaries and expectations in advance.



“Having people present at meetings... you need time to prepare the meeting in advance. What can that person do for you? What are your boundaries going in? Set expectations.”

This programme has proven useful for supporting participants to share practical ideas and experience around developing more enabling systems to support case work, data collection, paying people, sharing their stories and recruitment processes.

“Online surveys have been less successful. Listening and anonymising stories has been more effective.”

Strategy

Some participants have had success working with people with first-hand experience in a specific project or campaign and are seeking to deepen their approach. Their aim is to include the people and communities they exist to serve in setting strategic priorities for their whole organisation, and to involve them in all aspects of organisational life.

This reflects the vision of the Solidarity in Social Change programme, but there is a lot to consider, to do this well. Strategic planning processes themselves must be designed to be inclusive and participatory, and boundaries and expectations about the scope of the work must be crystal clear. Care must be taken to ensure the right people are involved, not just the loudest voices. Consider in advance how to manage differences of opinion, different priorities, or the different perceptions of risk that may arise.

“If you are not able to commit to these things, it might not be the right time to start the work. If you jump straight in, you could land up making commitments you are unable to deliver.”

For those embarking on this journey, one question feels key. For some participants, working with people with first-hand experience is, in simplistic terms, a means to an end – a way of generating deeper insights and greater legitimacy for their organisation’s work to tackle housing injustice. For others, the process of working together is itself a way of transforming inequalities – and therefore an important outcome in its own right.

Being clear about where your organisation stands on this issue is an important part of understanding what’s possible and what’s important to prioritise along the way.



What can organisations do?

Culture

- Make culture visible. Question assumptions and talk about how they affect decisions and resources allocation. Prioritise relationships – between staff, and with the people and communities you work with.
- Take the time needed to build trust. Get to know people as people – what lies beyond the label of ‘people with lived experience’?
- Establish clear boundaries and expectations about what you hope to achieve together and honest about what you each stand to gain. Renegotiate expectations as things change.
- Be thoughtful about language. Jargon excludes – simplify wherever possible.

Systems and processes

- Keep solidarity in mind in the design of internal processes – even those that might not seem obviously linked. Meetings, surveys, casework, recruitment, budgeting processes (and more) all play a part.
- If you’re inviting people to get involved in organisational systems or meetings, ask about barriers to participation – don’t assume. Be flexible and adapt.
- Be clear about how you will compensate people and value their time and expertise.

Strategy

- Be clear about your intentions. Who needs to be involved in strategic planning and why? Build in solidarity to the purpose, scope and budget from the start.
- Clarify expectations. Are you consulting or co-creating a strategy? Which elements are fixed, which are open to debate – and why? Decide and communicate in advance how you will manage differences of opinion.
- Evaluate what matters. Design clear feedback mechanisms to stay accountable to the people you are working with. Explore creative ways to track intangibles - like trust.



Civil society: Networks and funders

Individual programme participants work within the support or constraints of their organisations, but organisations in turn work within the wider networks and constraints of the sector.

Organisational cultures, processes and strategic priorities can be hard to address in a sector that pitches organisations against each other in competition for resources, or that prioritises quantity of deliverables over quality of outcome. Collaborative networks and supportive funders can both play an important role in supporting the shift to solidarity in social change.

Collaborative networks

As programme hosts, we have felt keenly the responsibility of supporting participants to champion solidarity – not least because of the impact on individuals set out above. Feedback from participants has helped us understand the value of bringing people from different organisations together around a common cause.

We have heard that safe spaces for reflection and conversation with people with shared interests and concerns has offered valuable support.

“There are clear, contained boundaries to this process that build trust. It’s a chance to step back.”

Having spaces to connect and build relationships with people working in organisations outside of a local area, or with those tackling housing injustice in a different way, has provided opportunities for mutual reciprocity and collaboration.

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

Over time, and with trust, these collaborative relationships between people from different roles and organisations and can help challenge assumptions and broaden perspectives.

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

“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.”



This programme seeks to build knowledge, skills and confidence across the Oak partnership, but there is only so much we, at SMK, can do ourselves. By bringing participants and organisations together and facilitating spaces for open dialogue, knowledge sharing and inquiry, organisations can do support each other.

The role of funders

Funders ultimately determine the conditions within which charities and other funded organisations in the sector operate. Their expectations and requirements play a significant role in enabling or undermining the more responsive, relational approach that working in deeper solidarity requires.

The sector is shifting, and more funders are requiring organisations to show how they involve people with first-hand experience in their work. This is right – and needed. But without tangible support and understanding there is a risk that these efforts will put too much burden on individual members of staff – and cause real harm to those with first-hand experience of social issues they are trying to work with.

“We’re under a lot of pressure, without much support. Oak seem to be really trying to do something different with this programme.”

Participants told us they find it hard to meet expectations of scale while maintaining the quality of relationships they believe is needed. The onus is on organisations to prove they make a measurable difference if they are to survive in a competitive sector.

Once again, individual relationships matter. Participants told us that having a supportive personal relationship with a funder can make all the difference to feeling able to take risks, implement new ways of working and have time and space to reflect and learn.

“I’ve always had a good relationship with my grant manager. I feel like she trusts me. That makes all the difference.”

This kind of relationship doesn’t happen by chance. It requires a fundamental re-evaluation of the role of a funder in supporting solidarity in social change, an openness and curiosity about new ways of working and a reallocation of time and resource. There is an opportunity for us, as hosts of the programme, to help participants find creative ways to measure the impact and difference that working in solidarity can make so they can influence funders themselves.

“I found the programme helpful for my own line of inquiry about how to have frank conversations with funders about the concessions they need to make – like reaching lower numbers of clients – if they want to fund organisations to meaningfully build solidarity.”



What can the sector do?

Collaborative networks

- Each organisation is part of a wider ecosystem of social change. Be clear about what you are best placed to do, and what the communities you serve are best placed to do with you, then seek out strategic collaborations with other organisations and groups.
- Competition can hinder collaboration. Consider widening your network to include people with a shared commitment to solidarity, working in different sectors or locations.
- All relationships take time to build trust. Participants appreciate knowing this is a five-year programme, with time to go deeper in our support for each other.
- Don't underestimate how much you can learn from people with first-hand experience, or from people in more junior roles. There's value in bringing together diverse perspectives and challenging your assumptions.
- If you're a funder, invest in collaborative networks across your grantee partnerships, and allow organisations to build in time for seeking external support to their bids.

Supportive funders

Funders are rightly asking organisations to work more closely with people with first-hand experience. It's important they also support the conditions for organisations to make the shift. Funders can:

- Engage more deeply with the nuance and complexity of organisations involving people with first-hand experience in social change strategies.
- Fund generously, to strengthen organisations over the long term.
- Look beyond tangible outputs, to the less concrete but vital work of building trusting relationships between organisations and communities. Work with partners to develop new mechanisms for accountability to measure this kind of success.
- Trust their grantees to experiment, make mistakes and adjust – without penalty.
- Collaborate with other funders to see the bigger picture, develop a common language and develop their own funding practice.

It's not always easy for organisations to speak openly and honestly with funders or to report on the challenges they face. Those that do have that opportunity could use it to influence funders on behalf of others.



Society: Campaigning for change

The work of social change does not occur in a vacuum. The impact of the current social, economic and political climate cannot be overlooked. Staff working in the housing and homelessness sector are dealing with the harsh reality of a desperately unequal society. More and more people are needing their services, and increasing numbers are facing destitution and crisis.

“It’s so challenging out there. We’re dealing with a really high turnover of people, in increasingly dire situations.”

“How do we get people with lived experience to participate? Many times, they come to us during a crisis. That is not the right time. The power dynamic there needs to be named better and understood.”

Meeting people’s needs in the moment is the priority. We heard of people in campaigning roles being taken away from the task of working for transformative change, to help stretched colleagues deal with the needs on the ground.

“Just campaigning gets pushed down priority list - we know it will make the difference long term, but people need us now.”

Other factors influence the capacity of organisations to campaign. Public trust in charities has declined, and the space and right to campaign is under threat. This can create a culture of fear that a mistake or misstep could cause serious reputational damage.

In this climate, the task of changing the way campaigning happens – and developing the organisational systems and culture to support the shift towards deeper solidarity with people with first-hand experience – is hard to prioritise. Particularly when organisations are under conflicting pressures to prove efficiency and measurable impact alongside greater and more meaningful involvement of the people they exist to serve.

This can seem bleak, but we remain optimistic because we believe in the power of committed people working together for change. The dedication and passion for change among participants on the programme is inspiring. The breadth and depth of knowledge – of all kinds – is remarkable. New political opportunities are on the horizon in the year ahead. Together, we believe this partnership has the capacity to create real change to the lives of people facing housing injustice – and real change in the way we pursue change itself.



What can be done?

- **Prioritise trusting relationships:** With people and communities you work with, with colleagues within and between organisations, and with funders. Time invested now will support strategic, collaborative action when the time is right.
- **Develop a clear strategy for how you want to work for change:** Understand your context – what matters most to the people you work with, what are you all best placed to do? Develop a set of criteria to support prioritisation and decision-making, and feedback mechanisms to help you stay accountable in rapidly changing situations.
- **Keep campaigning on the agenda:** Understand and educate colleagues and Trustees on the right to campaign (see SMK's website for [resources](#), including [Using your charity's voice effectively in the run up to a General Election](#)).
- **Keep solidarity on the table:** even small changes you can make now in specific campaigns, or in developing systems and processes for working with people with first-hand experience will pay dividends later.
- **Be honest with yourself and others:** about the extent of what's possible for you to do.



5. A note on language

We have been learning the 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. Many people working in social sector organisations identify as having lived experience of a social issue. Some talk about it in their work but others, for various reasons, choose not to.

If we’re serious about working in deeper solidarity, we need to be willing to see beyond the labels of ‘lived experience’ and ‘professional’ roles. This is not to downplay the value of knowledge and experience gained from first-hand experience, but to acknowledge that binary distinctions between people are often oversimplistic. They can limit our ability to see each other as fellow human beings, with all the messy complexity – and possibility – that this entails.

“The way we do this work could be a way of boxing people in, predetermining who they are, defining them by their past.”

Despite this recognition, in writing this report we have found it hard to avoid using language that reinforces this false division. We often feel like the language we need doesn’t exist.

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.

Talking about power reveals the different ways that inequality can manifest but feels abstract for some. We talk instead about solidarity, to signal our intention 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 even that reflection brings risk. 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.

“Part of me thinks that if you are doing it right it doesn’t matter what language you use. It doesn’t need to be something separate. It’s more about doing it than whether you label it.”

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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