

Insights

about working in solidarity



**Solidarity in
Social Change**

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1. About the Solidarity in Social Change programme

Solidarity in Social Change is a partnership between Oak Foundation's UK Housing and Homelessness programme and Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK). 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.

The organisations in the partnership are all working to end housing inequity, but their work takes many forms with many different communities. What participants share is a deep commitment to not only tackle the root causes of housing inequity, but also to change the way in which they pursue change itself. They recognise the need to do more to ensure the needs and aspirations of people directly affected by social issues are at the heart of attempts to address them – and acknowledge that responsibility for change cannot rest solely on the shoulders of those who bear the brunt of that injustice.

As programme hosts, we at SMK bring tools and frameworks to navigate complex terrain, seek out and share different kinds of knowledge and expertise, and convene conversations. We are documenting and making sense of what we hear so that, together, we can strengthen our collective understanding of what it means to work in deeper solidarity for social change.

“This work can be isolating - there's solidarity in this room.”

About this report

This report is a summary of insights from the second year of the Solidarity in Social Change programme. All quotes are from programme participants working for Oak-funded organisations. Quotes are anonymous to protect anonymity.

We have written at length about the limitations of language in this work¹. There are opportunities and challenges associated with concepts like 'lived experience'. We welcome this debate, as we believe greater clarity around language can support clarity of thinking and shared understanding. We also recognise the need to move from conversation to action.

We use the term 'first-hand experience' to describe direct, first-hand experience of housing inequity, including insecure or inadequate housing and homelessness, unless otherwise stated.

¹ See, for example, *It's All About Power* and *Insights about working in solidarity year 01*.

2. What is Solidarity in Social Change?

Solidarity in social change is a commitment to standing together in the face of inequity and injustice and working together for social change.

This commitment arises from our belief that our efforts to drive social change are more powerful when we work together. Bringing together diverse perspectives makes for better decisions, stronger communities and more transformative social change.

It recognises that some perspectives, particularly those gained through first-hand experience of inequity and injustice itself, are too often marginalised or excluded – both in wider society and in our work for social change.

A deep commitment to solidarity is not simply about including those voices in the status quo. It is a commitment to transforming ourselves and our relationships, and the processes and cultures that define our work for change, so we can truly stand and work together as equals, across difference.

At SMK, we believe that understanding our own power, and using it consciously, is key to deepening solidarity in social change. You can read more in our guide, [*It's All About Power*](#).

“Power doesn’t flow like a liquid but it’s not immovable like a solid. It can flow and transfer but it’s difficult to do. Building solidarity is one of the ways you move it. You channel it by tapping into experiences and privileges.”

Making sense of solidarity

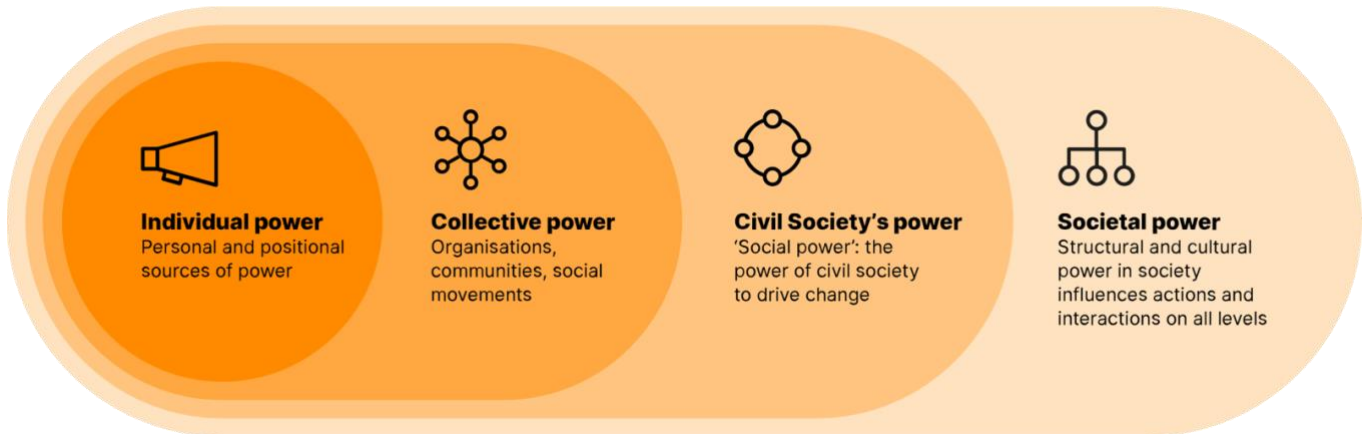
All the participants of this programme are individuals working within organisations, alongside people and communities, to drive wider social change in housing injustice and homelessness. This means all are working within complex systems. Many different relationships, structures and expectations are at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

To navigate all this, we find it helpful to think in terms of ‘nested systems’ to disentangle the complex, interconnected issues and map a path to 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 this complex system, that can help us 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.



We've gathered a lot of information over the course of this year. We've used the nested systems of the Power Lens to make sense of what we've heard and structure this report. Many of the insights shared in our report *Insights about working in solidarity Year 01* remain relevant in Year Two, but our understanding has deepened.

For more about the Power Lens, see SMK's guide, *It's All About Power*.

3. Summary of key insights

Individuals

- Many social sector professionals are deeply committed to working in solidarity. But they are tired and concerned about causing harm.
- The wider political and social context has taken a toll. Risk of burnout is high when people feel deeply invested in their work and powerless to help people.

Strategy for change: Staff need tangible support from colleagues and leaders to resource themselves to do the reflective, relational work of meaningful solidarity.

Organisations

- Organisations are under pressure to involve people with first-hand experience, but don't always yet have processes, structures and culture in place to do this well.
- Individual staff members can effect change in their organisations, but without support from senior leaders this increases the burden on already stretched staff.

Strategy for change: Leaders need to prioritise relationships at a strategic level and provide resources and support – including formal training and spaces for reflection.

The sector

- Solidarity and trusting relationships *between* organisations are essential for building capacity to support solidarity with people with first-hand experience.
- Trusting, collaborative relationships support the sharing of knowledge, resources and concerns. Competition for funds can hinder this.

Strategy for change: Funders could do more to support intentional, collaborative communities of interest and practice with partners to explore diverse perspectives, build shared understanding and work towards tangible shared goals.

Society

- Social sector organisations are on the frontline of dealing with political decisions and need more support to campaign for change, alongside their firefighting role.
- The new Government brings new possibilities for 'insider' tactics, but campaigns must be rooted in the needs and aspirations of people most effected.

Strategy for change: There is an immediate opportunity to campaigning together to influence change, but this can raise issues less well understood than co-producing services. Social change organisations need strategic support to do this well.



4. How to build solidarity: What are we learning?

A commitment to deepening solidarity requires a system-wide approach to putting relationships at the heart of our work for social change. Barriers – and opportunities – exist at all levels of the system.

Solidarity may look different to different people and in different settings. This section is not a definitive ‘how to’ guide, but a collection of insights that have emerged in Year Two of the programme.

“Initially I thought that solidarity was going along with whatever young people said, but now I realise that solidarity is not codling or agreeing, sometimes the most respectful thing you can do is disagree.”

Individuals

A key assumption of the Solidarity in Social Change programme is that people need to reflect on their own assumptions, actions – and power – if they are to work meaningfully alongside people whose background and experience may be different to their own. In challenging times, with limited time and resources. this is easier said than done.

Personal barriers

Overwhelm

We've heard how participants are:

- Sacrificing their own needs to support others – some of whom face dire situations
- Feeling 'stuck', unable to find solutions or help people in the way they wish they could
- Feeling exhausted, angry or overwhelmed by the enormity of the issues they face

To suggest that people working in these conditions need to do more to challenge their own assumptions does not do justice to the reality of their situation.

“When you're tired, even exciting opportunities can feel exhausting. It takes effort, which needs to be replenished.”

Without support, the possibility of burnout is high. This brings risks both to the individual, their organisation and the sector. If staff remain in post, exhaustion and compassion fatigue may become an obstacle to the reflective, relational work of solidarity.

Professional expectations

Valuing different forms of knowledge and expertise is essential, but can lead to a loss of confidence, or sense of legitimacy.

“It's a challenge for professionals. We're encouraged to feel comfortable in the 'expert' position – the feeling of loss of expertise can feel threatening.”

A recurring theme on the programme has been around the difficulty many participants' face in setting boundaries around their work, particularly when working with people who are unable to switch off from their own situation at the end of the day.

Many also told us that wearing different hats can be a struggle, with expectations to show up differently depending on whether they're working on the frontline or with colleagues.

“Taking on different roles in different situations, contexts and relationships and maintaining clear personal boundaries can be hard.”

Entrenched social norms

The patterns and dynamics that need to shift to effect change towards solidarity run deep. They affect each of us in ways that can feel deeply personal. Despite the will to change, participants don't always feel they're doing enough.

“It's hard to step outside of dynamics of rescuer, perpetrator and 'victim'. They're entrenched in society.”

Resourcing ourselves

Just as people need lots of ways to participate in change strategies, participants recognised they need different ways to resource themselves. This may mean having a menu of options rather than a single solution and finding ways to motivate or incentivise action for yourself, colleagues and clients. Strategies include:

Prioritise *all* relationships if you want stronger relationships with people with first-hand experience

Solidarity is all about relationships. Stronger relationships with colleagues and others in your professional network are not a distraction or a 'nice to have'. They are an essential factor in strengthening capacity to build solidarity with people directly impacted by housing inequalities.

“It is about managing yourself effectively, as well as working collaboratively with others.”

Don't shy away from the difficult feelings and conversations – ignoring them won't make them go away. But remember you can work together and play together too. It doesn't have to feel hard or serious all the time.

“Replicate 'doing with' with your colleagues!”

Be clear about your 'why'

Having clarity about your own needs and aspirations for working in social change can help stave off inadvertent acts of 'saviourism' and help provide a sense of purpose when things are tough.

At an event this year, we spent some time exploring our relationship to hope. We listened to stories of hope that were emerging through participants' work and reflected on some of the

things changemakers have said about hope over the years. Each of us had a different relationship to hope, but the quote that most resonated was this one, from author and activist bell hooks:

“Hope is essential to any political struggle for radical change when the overall social climate promotes disillusionment and despair.”

Through our conversations the understanding emerged that, whether our concern is for large scale social change or changing ways of working, hope is something each of us can intentionally and actively choose to adopt and cultivate, to resource us and our work.

Celebrate small milestones but keep in mind the big picture

Any change process can take a lot of energy at the start but may get easier as you gain momentum. Some things that once seemed impossible become second nature. None of us may ever know the full extent of the difference we make – especially through the relationships formed with others. Celebrating small, tangible ‘wins’ can help maintain motivation.

“One of the joys of participation is that it always stretches beyond the tangible outputs of a particular project to the personal impact on those involved.”

Acknowledge the limits of what you personally can do

Part of working in solidarity is rejecting the idea that any one person can ever have all the answers or do all the work. This is about working together for change.

“Don’t feel you need to have all the answers. Stop going in with solutions – find out what people feel and why. Ask questions, be genuinely curious.”

When things feel too overwhelming, it may help to seek out inspiring stories of success – or to zoom out and take an intergenerational perspective.

“Remember your work is a small but mighty contribution to a wider movement towards social change, that reaches across time and space.”

Active listening: A key skill for deepening solidarity

Listening is something almost all of us do, almost all the time. But how often do we take the time to reflect on the impact of our listening, or to practice listening as a skill in itself? You can practice listening with a colleague – or, even better, as a group of three,

Take a couple of minutes each to be:

- **The storyteller:** You could share around a theme, or just something that's on your mind.
- **The listener:** Just listen! Ask questions or reflect back what you've heard but resist the urge to problem solve or give advice.
- **The observer:** Notice how the listener listens, and the affect that has on the storyteller. Be ready to share what you've noticed.

Take a moment to reflect on the process after each story session, then take turns so each of you experiences how it is to be in each role. At the end, you could identify any patterns or insights.

Levels of listening

If you want to take it further, you could explore some of the theory behind what it means to listen well. Eg this short video online describes different [Levels of Listening](#):

- **0 Cosmetic:** not listening!
- **1 Downloading:** listening to confirm
- **2 Conversational:** listening to respond
- **3 Empathising:** putting yourself in their position
- **4 Participating:** making connections, seeking possibilities

How can you apply this in your work? You might not agree with these levels of listening! What might you need or want to do differently?

Organisations

Everyone can take steps to resource themselves and develop key skills for strengthening relationships in their work. But it is not fair to put all the responsibility onto individual staff members. Not only do resilience and relationships require intentional effort – they need resource. Investing in them can feel at odds with the urgent deadlines and situations, and the need to provide evidence of measurable impact, that many people working in formal social change organisations face.

An organisation-wide approach is required to address processes, structures and culture and create the conditions for relationships to flourish. We invited experts from St Basils to talk about their organisation-wide approach to creating Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE).

Psychologically Informed Environments: Creating conditions for relationships to flourish

At the root of St Basil’s PIE approach is an acknowledgement that many people experiencing homelessness have also experienced trauma or have multiple and complex needs. The aim of PIE is to ensure service providers are ‘psychologically informed’ with the right knowledge and skills to work with people effectively. The aim is to break the cycle of challenging and confusing behaviour that can lead to further exclusion and lack of support.

PIE recognises that valuing relationships and promoting psychological needs requires an organisation-wide approach, staff training and specialist support:

Whole systems approach	Training & support	In-house psychologist
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicit framework and expectations • Development of a shared language • Consistency with other programmes • Partnership with Mental Health Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PIE foundation training • PIE managers & champions workshop • Reflective practice strategy • Evaluation to measure outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversees strategic development • Consultation on individual cases • Targeted PIE in areas of higher need • De-briefing support following serious incidents

St Basil’s organisation-wide approach to PIE

Not all organisations can recruit an in-house psychologist, but all can take inspiration from St Basil’s commitment to prioritising relationships at a strategic level, providing clear expectations, guidance and support – including formal training and opportunities to reflect and debrief.

While PIE was designed to create positive outcomes for clients and service users, staff at St Basil's have found adopting PIE benefits them too. Putting relationships first promotes engagement and collaboration, enhancing learning, growth and change.

Towards an organisation-wide approach to solidarity in social change

Like PIE, solidarity in social change is a guiding approach rather than an extra task to be fitted in. This year we began conversations with programme participants about what can help create the conditions for solidarity within an organisation. We are early on this journey, but some insights are emerging.

People are at the heart of change

Embedding solidarity is a process of organisational change. Like any change process, key to success will be ensuring the right people are part of the conversation – and are supported to value the diverse perspectives that they and others bring.

For some organisations, that will mean convening staff and people with first-hand experience for a conversation about how they can better work together. For others, it might mean bringing together people from different teams to share insights from existing practice. For others it might mean convening staff of all levels with Board members to explore the risks of taking action – or not taking action – towards solidarity in their work.

We know that tangible steps such as ring-fencing time and budget to allow for building trust with clients can make all the difference. And we know that clearly communicating and managing expectations about what's fixed and what's flexible is essential.

Just as important is acknowledging that there may be different levels of understanding, or competing priorities and accountabilities, within a staff team. Creating organisational change takes time and needs a strategic approach.

“We need to think carefully about how we bring colleagues into the conversation. Accept that this is a learning journey, it will take time to shift.”

Those in frontline roles may be under pressure from colleagues or funders to do *more* to involve people than they feel is safe. Once again, transparency and clear communication about the opportunities and challenges of working in this way is key.

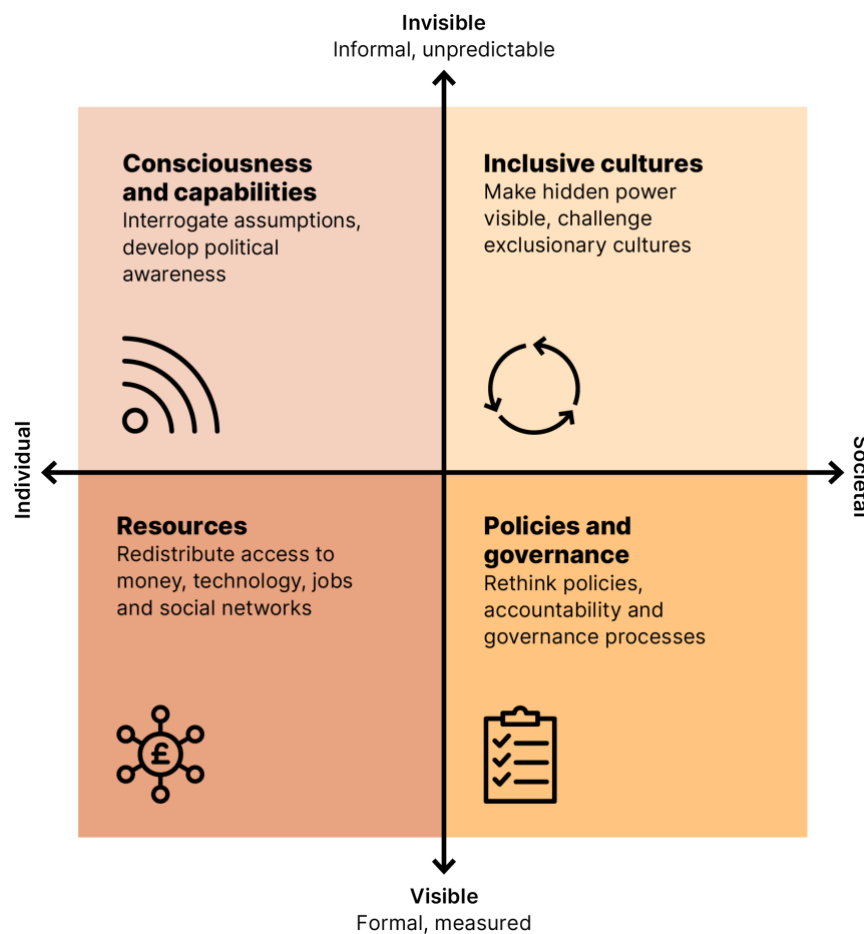
“Is involving people with first-hand experience in bigger picture issues appropriate when they're experiencing crisis? This work is important but it needs a critical lens.”

The work of deepening solidarity is context specific and emergent, requiring learning and adaptation rather than prescribed solutions or fixed outcomes.

Tools and concepts don't provide answers, but they can help us ask better questions

Solidarity is not really a conceptual issue. At its heart is a commitment to bringing together different ways of knowing and experiencing the world – and valuing knowledge from lived experience as highly as theoretical or professional knowledge. For solidarity to be meaningful, it involves deep personal reflection – healing, even – and relationships based on trust. However, simple conceptual frameworks do have value. They can help teams develop a shared language and understanding and make sense of, and navigate, complex situations.

The Power Framework reveals the different dimensions of power at play in organisational life and encourages us to pay attention to things we may otherwise overlook. We trialled it with South of Scotland Community Housing to help them devise a strategy to build on existing strengths and prioritise the shifts in policy, practice, culture and resource needed to unlock change towards greater equity and solidarity.



The Power Framework

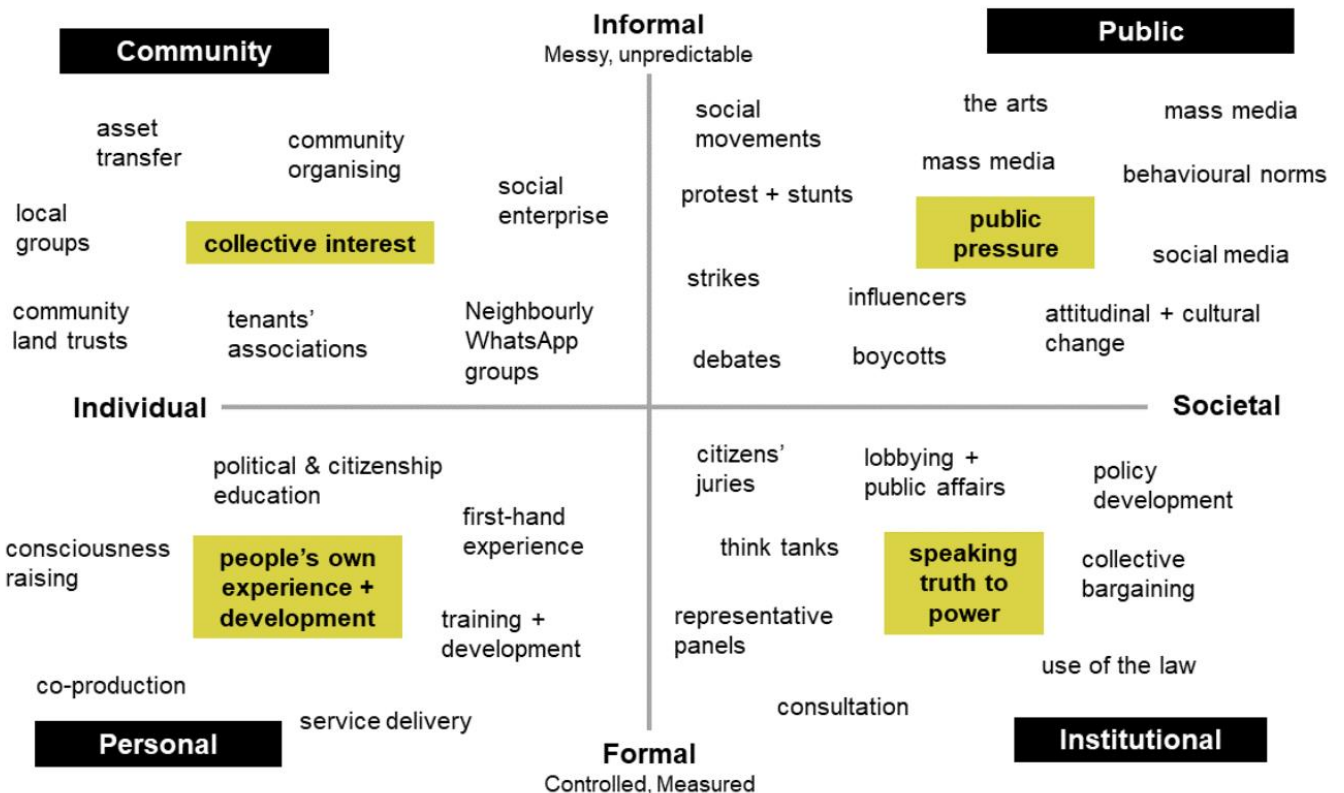
Solidarity will look different in different contexts. What’s the next best step for you?

Too often, conversations about how organisations can work with people with first-hand experience prescribe a right or wrong way. But social change organisations are so diverse, approaches to solidarity must necessarily be context specific.

The organisations in the partnership are all working to end housing inequity, but their work takes many forms with many different communities. Some provide support to people experiencing homelessness, some are working to address renters’ rights, others are advocating for changes to the law. Some work with refugees and migrants, others with women experiencing domestic abuse. Some work with young people at risk of homelessness, others with people with multiple and complex needs.

The relationships between each of these organisations and the communities they serve are different. Some are large household name organisations working nationwide, others are embedded in their local communities. Some are charities, staffed by professionals who may or may not themselves have first-hand experience of housing inequity. Others are unions and community-led organisations whose staff share the experiences and demands of those they serve. Opportunities and challenges can look very different in each of these situations. We think that what matters most is the next best step.

We used SMK’s Social Change Grid with a range of organisations to help them identify what kind of social change work they were engaged with in relation to others, what opportunities exist for strengthening relationships with constituents, and what strategic partnerships they could consider to build effective change strategy.



The Social Change Grid



Solidarity in action

Housing Hights Northern Ireland: Holding on to hope

It has filled me with hope to reflect on the past year and the opportunity we had to work with a group of experts by experience to develop our new Housing and Domestic Abuse Training Course. This phenomenal group of women inspired, shaped, and steered our project right from its inception. We are so grateful to each of them for their courage, creativity and leadership.

Last Spring we began our journey on the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland's 'Community Solutions to Housing and Homelessness' programme. We were delighted to meet North Down and Ards Women's Aid who through the programme. They put us in contact with a group of women they were supporting, who became the experts by experience at the heart of our project.

We began our first focus group with the women with a blank slate. We started by simply asking the women about their experiences of homelessness. We asked them to reflect on their journeys and the barriers they had faced along the way. We also asked them what needed to change. One of the key things they said was that the first person they approached for housing help needed to understand what they were experiencing, they needed to be able to identify the signs of domestic abuse, know how to signpost to support and above all, they needed to show empathy.

An immersive training course

These experiences and insights sparked the idea of an immersive training course - to build empathy and awareness among frontline staff working in housing and homelessness across Northern Ireland.

At the heart of the course sits a virtual reality film, which we commissioned ESC Films to produce. They worked closely with the women through a series of workshops to develop a script based on their firsthand experiences. The film puts participants into the shoes of a woman seeking housing help when fleeing domestic abuse. Participants are then taken through a facilitated discussion, providing space to reflect on what they have seen and how it might influence their work. This is followed by a specialist training module, delivered in partnership with North Down and Ards Women's Aid, to equip participants with the skills and knowledge needed to support women in these circumstances.

Holding on to hope

It can be easy, amid a housing crisis, violence against women crisis, cost of living crisis, and so many other crises, to lose hope. Nevertheless, this project has enabled us to take a step forward. To help to improve one cog in the wheel, i.e. the housing system. While it may just be one cog, we know it is a crucial one. Moreover, it has reminded us that change is possible – what as a sector we can achieve when we collaborate and when we place experts by experience at the heart of what we do.

Read HRNI's Participation and Policy Coordinator Kerry Logan's full blog [here](#).

Partnerships

A key question we are asking on this programme is ‘how can we support a community of learning and practice for changemakers seeking to build solidarity?’ We are inspired by the breadth and depth of knowledge that exists across the partnership and keen to support the flow of knowledge, ideas and resources.

Our focus this year has been on supporting individuals and learning about the support organisations need, but some insights are emerging about building effective communities of interest and practice.

Building effective communities of practice

Acknowledge the power dynamics that exist between organisations

Different kinds of organisations have different access to resources, and different kinds of resources are valued differently. For example, grassroots organisations often have closer relationships or stronger trust with communities – but this can be overlooked.

“Acknowledge and value all organisations – including the smaller ones!”

Different organisations can also bring assumptions and ways of working and may have different attitudes towards risk. These differences are often most stark when larger and smaller organisations attempt to collaborate, but other factors – like proximity to London, or access to the media – can also make a difference.

“The ‘Goliaths’ are the gatekeepers for stories, as well resources. They have much higher visibility in terms of media and political input.”

We’ve seen that opportunities to build relationships across regions or sectors, where direct competition for funding isn’t an issue, can be especially useful.

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

Develop a shared language and understanding to support collaboration

Within such a diverse sector, a lack of shared understanding can be a real problem. Different people and organisations use different terminology around e.g., ‘campaigning’ ‘advocacy’ or ‘organising for change’. Taking the time to understand what different people mean when they use different terminology can reveal different assumptions or values. This shared

understanding is essential for collaboration – and is essential for crafting a clear, strong campaign message.

“Inconsistent use of language can lead to misunderstanding or to an inconsistent and less impactful message.”

Remember that some challenges impact everyone – you’re probably not alone

The sector doesn’t operate in a vacuum. Some challenges are systemic. Lots of people working in the sector are facing the same issues – e.g., managing funding difficulties or funders’ expectations, navigating misinformation or ‘cancel culture’, or struggling with tech that’s not fit for purpose.

Intentional efforts to create stronger partnerships and networks within the sector are vital for bringing both shared experience and diverse perspectives. Working together on specific, practical projects or opportunities for sharing experiences about tangible issues can be useful places to start.

“I’m learning about engaging others more wherever I can – including with people from other organisations. We can grow and build together.”

Campaigning in solidarity for social change

Opportunities to campaign for change have been challenged in recent years. Acts such as protest, and even the idea of ‘civil society’ as essential aspects of a healthy democracy, have been threatened. The change in Government in the UK promises new opportunities for civil society organisations and community groups to engage in dialogue, but how that will play out is yet to be seen.

Those of us working for change play a lot of different roles but are not always clear about our own position or legitimacy. Those involved in unions or community organising may be more outspoken, but those working in charities may be dependent on public funds and foundations – and can fear rocking the boat. Diversifying income streams may be necessary to promote independence but is not always easy.

“Too often, we in the sector become the public face of the problem – it can feel like our role is ‘laundering’ damaging government policy.”

A first step towards a more confident stance may be to get clear about where you stand, and the opportunities and limitations of that position. Where are you on a spectrum of ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the status quo? Standing firmly outside can push the debate to the extreme as a strategy for building support for the middle ground. Standing in the middle, you can act as a conduit or connector of different points of view.

There are many different approaches and tactics for social change, from the individual to the society-wide, and from the formal and measurable to the informal and less predictable - as SMK’s Social Change Grid (above) reveals. Social change can happen in the realm of addressing the personal consequences of inequity, organising around collective or community interest, shifting public opinion or influencing the institutions where decisions are made.

Taking strategic action to campaign effectively against the causes and consequences of injustice is one thing, but doing so in a way that truly centres the needs and aspirations of first-hand experience of that injustice is another. It requires change on many levels: from an individual commitment to how we show up and form relationships, to developing organisational processes, structures and cultures that enable us to work in this way, to the way we work together as a sector.

The sector has already thought hard about how to co-produce essential services with people with first-hand experience of social issues. What it takes to work together effectively in the necessarily outward-facing work of campaigning, with all the inherent and high-stakes risks it entails, seems less well understood.

We invited campaigners and practitioners to host a series of conversations to help us understand how to campaign in solidarity – from working together to understand how change happens and identifying strengths, to developing a strategic analysis and approach, to crafting a compelling campaign story, to evaluating the difference the campaign has made.

Understand social change as an ecosystem

Social change is most effective when diverse actors work together across a range of tactics. It's not necessary for one organisation to work across all parts of the social change ecosystem. It can be just as effective to develop an aware of your own organisation's strengths, find out what others are doing, and create strategic collaborations for change.

However, we heard how developing a deep understanding of how to drive effective change allowed Groundswell to develop a successful campaign that spanned all four quadrants of SMK's Social Change Grid.

Solidarity in action

Groundswell: An ecosystem of change

For Groundswell, there is no 'them' and 'us' – only *us*. Many of Groundswell's staff and peers have first-hand experience of homelessness. Their innovative projects train community researchers with experience of homelessness to gather stories of people's experiences from across the UK, elevating voices of people with experience of homelessness, challenging stereotypes and informing decision makers, to end health inequalities.

Their dynamic approach works across the whole ecosystem of change, with people with first-hand experience leading diverse campaigns designed to affect change on a range of levels:

Personal: Involving people in peer-led research to support their learning and development as well as leading to changes in personal health care provision.

Community: Focusing this research on a single area – Newcastle – allowed peers to engage closely with local pharmacies to effect meaningful change on a local level.

Public: Using creative approaches to share insights widely (such as a play, video, and a [podcast with Prince William!](#)), meant the campaign could also contribute to shifting public opinion and perception of people experiencing homelessness.

Institutional: Policymakers were personally invited to watch the play, peers took insights from the research to a conference for healthcare providers, and with support from staff set up an advisory board for doctors. All this influenced decision-makers at an institutional level.

Groundswell staff and peers are quick to point out that this work hasn't always been easy, but building relationships based on trust has been key. Read more about Groundswell's approach to campaigning in solidarity [here](#).

Take a strategic approach and work to your individual strengths

With so many different issues to address, and so many tactics for social change, it can be difficult to know where to start. Taking time to develop a clear, shared understanding is essential to ensuring the most important questions are raised, the most meaningful issues are addressed, and the most useful tactics are employed. Which aspect of an issue needs tackling and why? Is it particularly timely and urgent, or has an opportunity arisen that makes change more achievable? Different people may bring different, and equally important perspectives to these questions.

Just as important to developing an effective campaign strategy is understanding the contribution you – or those you work with – are each best placed to make. Who has a full enough understanding of the issue, and the expertise to make a difference? Who can help you? For example, is technical expertise needed for a specific action, or is it best done by people with close community connections?

We spoke to about their work with families bereaved by state-related deaths, including those who lost loved ones in the Grenfell Tragedy.

Solidarity in action

INQUEST: Strategic choices for working together

INQUEST provide specialist legal expertise to bereaved people, lawyers, the media and other agencies and have worked closely alongside bereaved families since their inception.

Any campaign requires a range of activity. *INQUEST* are exceptionally clear about their own expertise – and its limits – and who is best placed to undertake action in different situations. For example, when engaging a community or lobbying a local MP, families may be best to take action. For other tactics, legal or other technical expertise is needed.

Bereaved families are at the centre of all *INQUEST*'s work, and the different skills and experiences that families and staff bring are valued equally. But they offer a range of options for involvement. Their **Family-Led Action Model** is for situations where families feel able to take a lead, with specialist support such as communications and legal expertise provided by the *INQUEST* team. In other situations, a **Family Participation Model** is more appropriate, where leadership of a campaign is shared between *INQUEST* and families.

By clearly recognising their own professional role and expertise, *INQUEST* ensures families are given the support they need to lead or contribute to powerful campaigns.

Read more about *INQUEST*'s range of strategies for campaigning with bereaved families, and discover some tools to help design a strategic campaign [here](#).

Drive impactful change with collective stories not misery memoirs

Effective campaign communications are not driven by what we want to say, but by what our audience needs to hear – to inspire them to take action. However, too often, organisations rely on sharing deeply personal stories of ‘lived experience’ to galvanise support. This can be harmful and retraumatising for the individual, potentially leaving them exposed to unscrupulous journalists or unkind comments; and reinforces stigma and negative social stereotypes.

Some campaigning organisations, such as *Living Rent*, recognise that a ‘spokesperson’ approach enables an impactful campaign without such negative consequences.

Solidarity in action

Living Rent: A spokesperson approach

Living Rent are Scotland’s union of tenants, carers, workers and residents, organising to improve daily lives. Their tips for creating a spokesperson network include:

- **Develop a skilled network:** Don’t limit people’s value to the stories they can tell. What other skills can they bring? What new skills can you help them develop?
- **Prioritise relationships and support:** If you can, provide media training. At the very least, work towards a culture of mutual support and safety in the group.
- **Decide together in advance which stories to include:** Ensure people understand the risks. They don’t have to share everything about their experience, or even tell their own story - they’re a spokesperson, sharing on behalf of the collective. Keep the focus on the agreed problem, impact and solution.
- **Manage expectations and minimise the role of the individual:** It can be scary to share a personal story, and if things go wrong people can feel responsible for the success or failure of a campaign. Of course, following up and taking concerns seriously is vital. But so is developing a culture where giving an interview is just one role in a bigger campaign strategy which will inevitably experience highs and lows.
- **Start slowly:** Don’t expect someone to handle a national interview on their first outing. Rehearse with the network, then start with smaller, local audiences – don’t underestimate the value of the local press. Never push someone to do something they’re not comfortable with, even if they decide at the last minute to pull out.
- **Build relationships with journalists:** At Living Rent, all media inquiries go through a staff member to ensure a single point of contact and alleviate pressure on the spokespeople. It’s their job to understand the journalists’ agendas, and ensure spokespeople only work with those who can be trusted not to derail an interview or misrepresent a story – or feel fully prepared and ready to take that risk.

Read more about Living Rent’s approach, and how to craft a compelling message [here](#).

Know you've made a difference to the right people in the right way

Evaluating a campaign is difficult enough, but making the leap to doing that in a way that is truly participatory can be daunting. However, involving the people you work with can both strengthen and simplify your approach and focus efforts on what matters most.

Key to effectively evaluating the difference you've made is to be really clear, specific and pragmatic about the change you want to make, and the action needed to make it happen. Key to doing that in solidarity is to involve the people who will be directly impacted by your campaign. Think about how you can working together from the start – to design intended outcomes, task people with gathering stories or data or feeding ideas back to communities or work together to make sense of what you've heard. Allow people most affected by a campaign to have a key role in decision making – not just fill in a survey.

Keep it simple. We heard from [Community Foundation Northern Ireland](#) that his is about developing a culture of reflective learning where all knowledge counts, not adopting more and more complicated tools.

Solidarity in action: Community Foundation Northern Ireland

As a funder themselves, [Community Foundation Northern Ireland](#) employed an external evaluator to co-design and develop a participatory approach to evaluation. But rather than getting bogged down in complex tools and processes, they recommend starting with five key principles:

Identify your values: Be clear about how you choose to work – and be led by those values.

Ask why: Ask why you're measuring what you're measuring, whose needs you're trying to meet and why.

Be honest: Be realistic about what's fixed and what's flexible, manage expectations carefully.

Be responsive: Be sure to listen to, and act on, any information you gather – or don't collect it at all.

Be inclusive: Evaluation can be simple – it doesn't need to be complicated or technical.

Power imbalances are always embedded in our work for change. Working together, ensuring people's time and contributions are properly valued, is a way to shift that dynamic. So, the process – as much as the outcome – contributes to change.

Read more about Community Foundation Northern Ireland's experience of participatory evaluation [here](#).



About Oak UK's Housing and Homelessness Partnership

Oak Foundation's UK Housing and Homelessness Programme (HHP) supports organisations to end homelessness and create housing opportunity. Oak's UK HHP funds not-for-profit organisations that are ambitious in their strategies to address structural inequalities – from testing new approaches to scaling up what works.

Housing issues intersect with a range of social issues, including criminal justice, mental health, violence against women and girls, racism, discrimination and hate crime, migration and immigration, unemployment, and low wages. Oak's UK HHP partners work across all these issues and include organisations for whom housing issues form a part of their strategies, as well as organisations with a sole focus on housing and homelessness.



About SMK

Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK) exists to support and champion change-makers and campaigners – both individuals and organisations – working across a wide array of issues to advance a more just society and a more sustainable world.

We do this by sharing the latest social change thinking and advice and acting as a powerful champion for campaigning as part of a healthy democracy. We believe social change is more effective when we work together, so connecting and growing solidarity across the change-maker community is at the heart of S



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