

A BETTER WAY

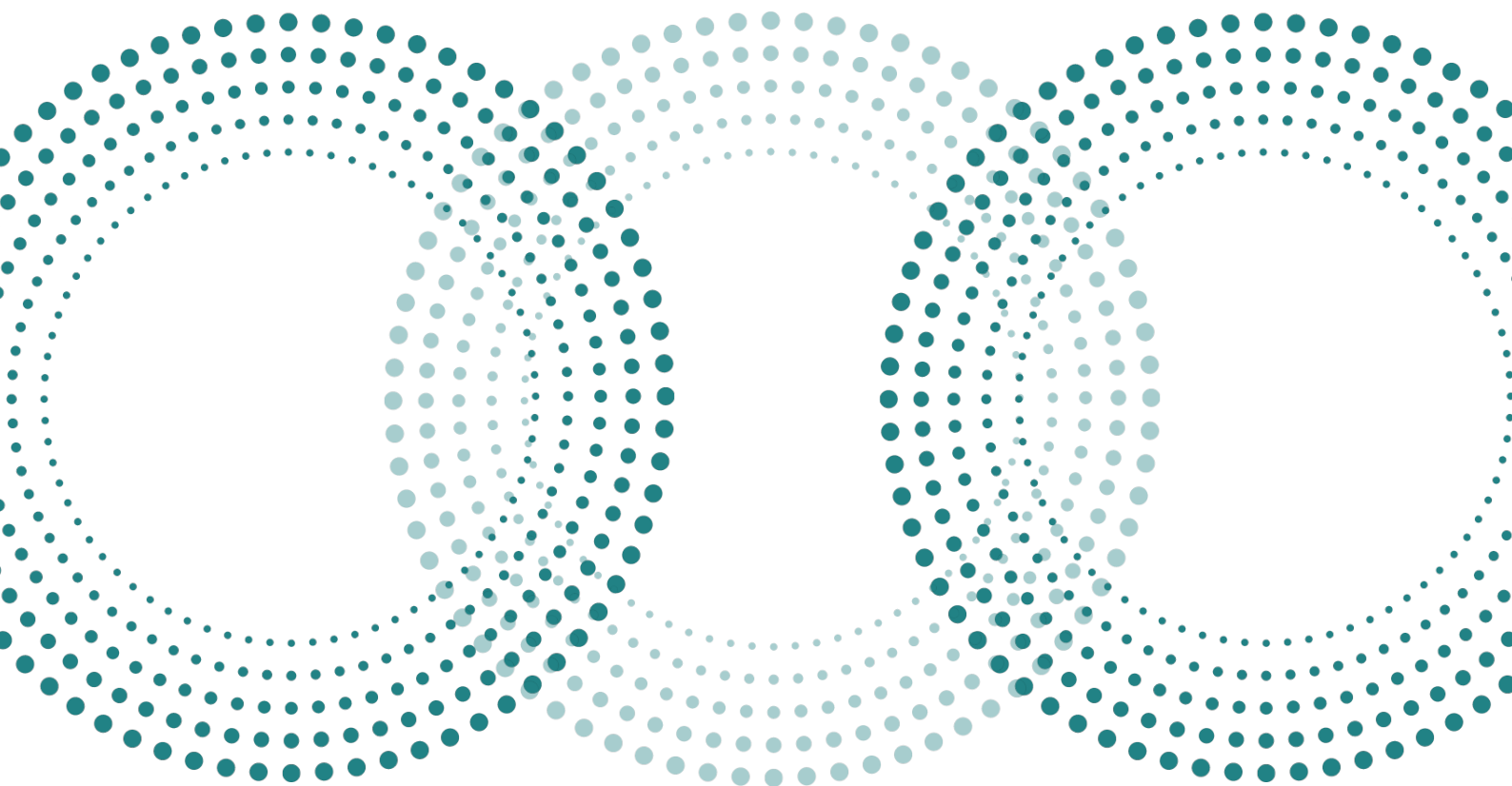
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A Better Way: a network to help build a fairer society

by Ilona Haslewood



'It is like a large brain, connecting up with synapses'

(Caroline Slocock, network co-convenor)

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Introduction

A Better Way (ABW) aims to draw together a broad spectrum of leaders from national level to the grassroots, including thinkers and practitioners, from the public private and social sectors, to learn from, invigorate and be inspired by each other. The network defines its purpose as 'to improve services, build strong communities and create a fairer society'¹. The remit that ABW has taken upon itself is huge; finding an approach that can deliver is essential. The national co-convenors of the network have described it as an "experiment".

This case study describes that experiment, viewed in part from a network perspective. It will weave this perspective into a story of ABW's origins, development, structure and activities, alongside its value for members and how it achieves social change. Inevitably, it reflects the network at a point in time, around the end of 2020 and early 2021.

The main sources of information for the case study are publicly available written outputs of the network² and six interviews with network co-convenors and members (including both founding members and those who joined later). Some direct quotations from the interviews are included in the narrative; I am grateful for interviewees' thoughts and time. The case study also draws upon a desk review I recently undertook for the Carnegie UK Trust³ on policy and practice development networks and the roles charitable foundations can usefully play in fostering them. When I refer to 'the networks literature', I generally mean

literature reviewed in that paper. Appendix 1 summarises some key points from it in an 'explainer'.

Carnegie UK Trust (CUKT) has been a supporter of A Better Way from its beginnings and has also enabled the production of this case study. My thanks go to CUKT and in particular to Ben Thurman and Pippa Coutts for their support throughout the project.



- 1 <https://www.betterway.network/who-we-are> [Accessed 13 April 2021]. A Better Way further defines itself as 'a network of people across society who are calling for a radical shift to liberate the power of connection and community.' A Better Way (2019) *A Call to Action for a Better Way*, <https://www.betterway.network/a-call-to-action> [Accessed 23 April 2021].
- 2 <https://www.betterway.network> [Accessed 14 January 2021]
- 3 Haslewood, I. (2021) *A review of the evidence on developing and supporting policy and practice networks*. <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/a-review-of-the-evidence-on-developing-and-supporting-policy-and-practice-networks> [Accessed 04 May 2021]

Origins

Network co-convenors Caroline Slocock and Steve Wyler point back to a series of roundtable discussions in 2012-2013 on the role of charities and civil society in a time of austerity where the first idea emerged that would eventually lead to the launch of ABW. At first, this was not about forming a network, but the need to find a concept around which a more hopeful story of social change could be told, one that could help create a positive space for further discussions and concerted action.

The concept that a group of civil society leaders (including Caroline and Steve) began to subsequently test was that of *the common good*; a public policy approach rooted in human relationships and a strong sense of shared citizenship. When guided by this approach, all sectors of society (including individuals) contribute, to make a renewed investment in a fairer and more prosperous future for all. Initial thoughts were gathered and then gradually crystallised in successive versions of a paper; its 2014 edition was published by CUKT, entitled *A Call to Action for the Common Good*.⁴

The outlines and applicability of the concept of the common good were fleshed out and further refined in a series of meetings in all four administrations of the UK in 2015, arranged by CUKT. The meetings brought together well-networked people from many sectors. The discussions confirmed that although the concept clearly had traction, real-world examples of its practical applicability had to be showcased. Perhaps the most surprising outcome from the meetings was how disruptive a 'common good mindset' could be when participants applied it to their own work, because it called for a radical re-think of impersonal, one-size-fits-

all models of service design and delivery⁵. The next step was to translate the *Call to Action* into actual action. But how?

Why a network?

Making existing examples of the common good visible to inspire more people meant creating a space for those who were already trying to make things better, to meet, exchange ideas and build relationships. These people existed in many places, in different sectors and in a variety of organisations. A specific concern was to ensure that this approach demonstrated what change for the better looks like in local communities and what it takes to re-design services that make a difference to people's lives.

At this stage, a few key people agreed that the best way forward would be to bring together a small group of leaders from a diverse spectrum of sectors and political views who did not all know each other but were linked through their shared commitment to change. This group was thus formed in early 2016 and would become the founding group of ABW.

The founding group drafted the first set of principles, around which the nascent network would be developed. Alignment with these principles would be the main way to attract members. According to the co-convenors, the description of what the initial principles meant evolved over the first three years of the network, but this was welcomed as a sign of a deeper understanding of what they meant in practice and as a way for members to make the network their own; they were also effective at attracting new members.

4 Crowther, N. (2014) *A Call to Action for the Common Good*, report, Carnegie UK Trust https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2016/02/pub14550114731.pdf [Accessed 14 January 2021].

5 Wyler, S. (2016) *A Call to Action for the Common Good*, blog 8 January 2016. Carnegie UK Trust <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/blog/call-action-common-good/> [Accessed 16 January 2021].

The eight principles, 'based on a common belief in the power of people acting together to bring about change' are:

- Prevention is better than cure
- Building on strengths is better than focusing on weaknesses
- Relationships are better than impersonal transactions
- Collaboration is better than competition
- Mass participation is better than centralised power
- Local is better than national
- Principles are better than targets
- Changing ourselves is better than demanding change from others.⁶

Looking at these developments from a networks perspective (see Appendix 1), it is clear that a hierarchical organisation or a project would not have been right, as a diverse range of people needed to be engaged who were committed to change, were willing to contribute and shared certain principles and a vision. Just as importantly, the sheer size and breadth of the purpose, and the timescale needed to achieve it, meant that a format that supports widespread engagement would be more likely to succeed. Networks are also good for relationship-based engagement, as well as mutual learning and inspiration.

Building and shaping the network

At the beginning of the process of building a new network (even if the relationships already exist between some of the would-be members), a number of 'design choices' must be made by those who take the lead. Some of these are

about *strategy* (such as a shared theory of change, purpose/functions, leadership and membership models, desirable culture, norms and values), others about *structure* (governance, facilitation and communication) and some about *learning*.⁷

After the launch of ABW in 2016, a conscious decision was taken by the two network convenors to focus on building *relationships* among new and founding members in order to generate trust, and to provide *shared spaces* for small groups to exchange experiences and deep reflection. It was thought best to let the network grow organically at first, even if it meant that it would not expand at a fast rate. The convenors also used their own contacts to bring in a range of people with different views and experiences, from different age groups and ethnic backgrounds.

The first groups met in London, mostly over dinner, and then more groups gradually started up further afield in England. The co-convenors found that discussions grew more and more powerful over the first year and began to influence members' own work. The discussions also inspired a collection of insights that, together with case studies, personal views and short papers on particular topics, fleshed out the network's principles in more detail. The insights document published in 2018 also included the story of the network up to that point, as told by Steve, one of the co-convenors.⁸

After another year of gradual expansion and relationship building, the network reached a membership of about 400. The next milestone, *A Call to Action for*

6 <https://www.betterway.network/the-change-we-want-to-see> [Accessed 13 April 2021]

7 For an example of a list of key design questions see Pugh, K. and Prusak, L. (2013) *Designing Effective Knowledge Networks*. MIT Sloan Management Review, Vol 55. No 1., reprint, p85. [Accessed 2 October 2020].

8 A Better Way (2018) *Insights for a better way: improving services and building strong communities*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57bad8f5725e253599088873/t/5b3b4c8d88251b554c54804e/1530612887791/Insights+for+a+Better+Way+final+%28revised%29.pdf> [Accessed 18 January 2021].

a Better Way, was published in 2019. The title echoed the earlier *Call to action* paper from 2014, but it was substantially different. According to the co-convenors, the 2019 document had a clearer focus on how to bring about change. It could also be said to have been built on a broader intellectual and practice base; the result of three years of developing and fostering the new network. It outlined four key areas of linked action, supported by existing examples of the envisioned change. The four key areas were: sharing power with people and communities; changing practices to help people thrive, not just cope; collaborative leadership for systemic change; and changing organisations to focus on communities and solutions (not on their own interests and survival).⁹

Further developments within the network, including changes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, will be set out in later sections.

Network activities

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, ABW mostly brought its members together face-to-face. Co-convenors encouraged the formation of small groups of up to 10 people, called 'local cells', that would get together informally, from the same locality, or over a social theme of shared interest. 'National cells' were bigger groups focusing on one of the four themes in the 2019 *A call to action*. In addition, roundtables (up to around 75 people), with guest speakers, discussed topics in greater depth.

Once COVID-19 restrictions came into force in March 2020, the four national

cells, and a fifth on changing deficit-based narratives about people, moved online and had four or five meetings each.¹⁰ Together with a number of national roundtables (on responses to COVID-19, on community power and on levelling up in the North) and a national gathering, by the end of 2020, the network met online at least 30 times. The co-convenors also held a series of meetings with other network organisations and individuals with a shared purpose to help build momentum. In addition, five bulletins, as well as 26 blogs and some occasional publications were published in 2020. This indicates a high level of network activity and shows that ABW adapted to the changing environment without engagement dropping off. As will be explained immediately below, quite the opposite happened.

Moving meetings online affected the network in important ways, both positive and negative. A positive effect was the increased inclusivity and accessibility of meetings. For example, significantly more members engaged actively in network meetings throughout the year, including from the North of England, compared with earlier times. Not having to spend a long time travelling was a benefit to members from the South as well, who noted that a one-hour meeting now took them one hour, as opposed to perhaps half a day. One member also highlighted as a positive that it is more difficult for talkative people to dominate online meetings.

The move to online meetings was accompanied by a big increase in ABW's social media presence. Both the number of Twitter followers and visits to the ABW website more than doubled during this period. One contributing factor may be that online events made it much easier to make rapid video clips of members for sharing on social media.

⁹ A Better Way (2019) *A Call to Action for a Better Way*, op. cit.

¹⁰ <https://www.betterway.network/forthcoming-events> [Accessed 4 February 2021].

Some members questioned, however, the extent to which it was possible to have conversations of a similar depth online as face-to-face; online discussions felt more stilted and also somewhat less enjoyable. Importantly for a network consciously aiming to forge relationships between members, the informal interactions were now largely missing - meetings tended to launch straight into the formal agenda. However, the co-convenors thought that the quality of online interaction improved quite quickly, for example by use of small breakout groups. The co-convenors also added twice monthly 'drop in' meetings, more informal opportunities for members to get to know each other and share developments. Nonetheless, a question remains about how best to nurture deeper relationship building in an online world.

Facilitating face-to-face vs online meetings were thought to pose different challenges: some interviewees observed that the informality of dinner meetings came with less structured facilitation, which sometimes allowed some voices to dominate and others to go unheard. People less closely engaged in network dinners could also feel as outsiders when they did attend.¹¹ Online meetings, on the other hand, required more 'management', which meant that convenors were seen as less able to actively contribute to the discussions than in face-to-face meetings.

At the 2020 online national gathering, participants voted to meet again physically where that made sense. Once restrictions are eased, some of the meetings, for example the thematic ones, are expected to remain online, but some events will happen face-to-face again, for example, some cell meetings based in a specific locality, and it is hoped that these will facilitate deeper relationship building.

Leadership and structure

As we have seen earlier, the network launched in 2016 with two national co-convenors and a small founding group, with local and national cells starting up depending on local membership and topics of interest. This form of distributed leadership and light, informal structure remains, in essence, to this day, but a few changes have occurred. A third convenor, Laura Seeböhm, joined the team in 2020, as convenor for the North of England, following a drive to better understand issues specific to the North and to engage with more leaders there. The founding group has lately been expanded into a 'core group' to include all the thought leaders of the five online national cells and Laura Seeböhm. Members are still welcome to form and facilitate their own cell, however, co-convenors are willing to help with organisation and facilitation.

ABW is a real-life example of the idea that network leadership is significantly different from leadership of organisations and project management, where command and control play a bigger role. Interviewed members, without exception, remarked on the central role Steve and Caroline played in reaching out to people and sharing their experience and social capital with network members. Members also praised their intellectual input into the network, their commitment and low-key, thoughtful, modest style of leadership that struck the right balance between not dominating, but also "not editing themselves out" completely. Important contributions by other core group members were also acknowledged by interviewees.

¹¹ This was noted by some respondents of the network membership survey carried out in June 2019. Carnegie UK Trust, unpublished report (n.d.).

Networks usually benefit from a supporting organisation (which can be hierarchical), or other supporting arrangement – but the supporting entity should not be confused with the network itself. Civil Exchange, a think tank led by Caroline Slocock, hosts ABW. However, as it is a very small organisation with little support infrastructure of its own, some of the practical support is carried out by the national co-convenors and some by CUKT. (Funding and further detail of practical arrangements is discussed later.)

Membership

There are no formal qualifying criteria for joining the network. The most important condition of membership is interest in the eight principles. The membership stood at around 680 in January 2021, with a large increase in 2020. Members are individual leaders – not organisations. The diversity of the membership is seen as a strength, which was described by one of the co-convenors as “a diversity of organisations, sectors and thinking”.

Accordingly, the membership consists of a broad range of leaders, coming from organisations of varying sizes, including tiny ones with only a few people and large ones employing thousands, some working at local level, others regionally or nationally. Some are involved in working directly with individuals, others are focused on policy, campaigning or skills development.

Co-convenors note that the breadth of sectors represented in ABW is quite unusual for a network, even if not all of them are equally present. Public sector presence is less prevalent than that of the social sector and private sector membership is the smallest. Diversity extends to political views too, even

if a larger proportion of the current membership is left of centre. Embracing a broad range of political perspectives without becoming bland, according to one member, is a constant balancing act, thus a live challenge to the network. However, they thought that, judged by sustained levels of attendance and interest, ABW is “getting it about right” and managing to remain “interesting, useful and practical”.

One of the interviewed members, who was not among the founders, came across ABW on the internet first, when reading a case study of an organisation that focused on relationship-building with the people it worked with. The member recalls being “blown away by the quality of the people and the conversations” at the first cell meeting. After this, they began attending other network events.

Another non-founding member first came across ABW when attending a learning event as a newly appointed leader of an organisation. The discussion that one of the ABW co-convenors facilitated there on stronger connections between stakeholders was an instant draw, strong enough for them to attend the ABW annual gathering. The then newly launched insights document (2018), the discussions, the people and the set of principles all “felt like a breath of fresh air”.

In this sense, the founding members’ original idea to grow and strengthen the network through using the eight principles, stimulating discussions, relationship-building, and examples of change, worked for these new members; both have since become key contributors to the network. The eight principles had personal and professional resonance and relevance for all interviewed members; they all cited examples of this from their own work. This suggests that ABW was primarily helping members to work towards common goals through their own activities.

It is on the network's agenda to further boost membership, particularly of public sector leaders and community businesses, leaders from the North of England, as well as those from BAME backgrounds. The Black Lives Matters protests in the summer of 2020 were a sharp reminder to the network that it had to keep striving to be truly inclusive.

Value for members

The interviewed members thought they had plenty of value out of their membership, describing ABW as a “very enabling network” and one that “brings value to my role”. One aspect of this is the validation and reassurance they gain from having a “fellowship” of like-minded people drawn to a similar set of values who want to engage with, and learn from, each other.

Members found peer learning opportunities very helpful, both with leaders of similar organisations and those different from themselves. The diversity of membership ensures that there is a rich flow of ideas, approaches and experiences. For some, “learning with people you wouldn't normally spend time with” was one of the best parts of being in the network. For example, many of the interviewees mentioned the concept of *radical listening* that they came across via an ABW member¹², an idea and practice they found powerful and wanted to use themselves. One member also spoke about receiving peer-mentoring from a fellow leader they had met through the network.

Several members pointed out that for them, engagement in the network was a welcome opportunity for deep reflection, creative thinking and collective sense-making. The topics and speakers were relevant and stimulating, and time and space for them for this type of thinking outside the network were in short supply.

One of the most important benefits of network membership, mentioned by every interviewed member, was the ability to form valuable relationships. This was coupled with a complimentary view of the “quality of the people” brought together by the network. The informality and the absence of power and rank-consciousness in network meetings were seen as key conditions that helped to form connections. One of the interviewed members noted that they felt able to follow up directly with any member they had met through the network and formed several useful relationships this way.

Members also credited the co-convenors' efforts to welcome new members and introduce members to each other. They encouraged the flow of conversations, unblocked them when necessary and generally kept knitting the membership together. Co-convenors were seen as generous with their help outside network events too.



12 Woodley, K. (2019) *Radical listening* <https://www.betterway.network/blog/radical-listening> [Accessed 23 April 2021]

Investment required by members

Networks can be resource-intensive to members, thus they must continue to provide value to them. Interviewees emphasised that ABW was not asking a lot of its members, but “you get out what you put in”. References to limited capacity popped up repeatedly, both in terms of diary space and, given the reflective nature of the network, head-space. Members were not always able to engage with everything they wanted to. Sometimes there would have been appetite for a local cell, but no-one in the local group was able to take on facilitating it. Lack of capacity was also one of the key limitations when members thought about future potential for joint action within the network.

Views differed on how resource-intensive the ‘thought leadership’ roles of the five themed cells were. They were mostly viewed as light-touch commitments, involving participation in events connected with the theme, stimulating the discussion while there and sharing reflections afterwards. For some, however, the role was already at the limit of what they felt able to offer, particularly as lack of capacity prevented them from making full use of the thinking emerging from the events.

There is currently no membership or attendance fee charged, something that the convenors thought helped to enable participation. Members’ comments also showed how helpful it was for leaders of small organisations to be able to reclaim the cost of travel and overnight stay after evening meetings (before 2020).

On the whole, there was no doubt that members perceived the benefits strongly outweighing the demands of membership. The June 2019 membership survey had suggested the same, according to which 86% of the 37 respondents thought the network should continue (and none thought that it shouldn’t).¹³

Funders, funding and practical support

The longest-standing supporters of ABW have been the Carnegie UK Trust, from before it launched as a network, and then the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. CUKT has been the most actively engaged; as one of the co-convenors put it, “more like an ally”. Esmée has been seen as interested and supportive, but on the whole, less closely engaged. John Ellerman Foundation also became a funder in 2020. Power to Change is the fourth funder as of 2021, focusing on enabling the network to expand in the North of England.

Convenors and interviewed members were appreciative of funders’ representatives participating in network meetings; they are seen as leaders in their own sector, offering a unique contribution and a “birds’ eye view” on salient social issues within their remit. ABW, jointly with New Philanthropy Capital, organised a roundtable in 2020, specifically for funders, to discuss building, sharing and using power – and ways to address power imbalances.¹⁴

¹³ A Better Way Network survey June 2019, op. cit.

¹⁴ Ahmad, S. (2020) *Are we always doing good?* A blog about sharing power <https://www.betterway.network/blog/are-we-always-doing-good-a-blog-about-sharing-power> [Accessed 13 April 2021]

Funding a network is substantially different from funding projects: timescales tend to be longer, outcomes much more dependent on the relationships and interactions between members, and as a consequence, funders are less able to predict results from their investment. This was recognised by the ABW leadership, alongside the fact that, as ABW was a principles-based network, funders' decisions to invest in it were also in effect based on affiliation with these principles.

Financial support from this small group of funders was thought sufficient to cover the network's operating costs of about £60,000 per year (before Power to Change came on board) – not a large amount considering all the activities, and that some of it is spent on reimbursing members' expenses, paying for event costs and, in 2020, a new publication. This funding covers some of the national co-convenors' time, but they note that they are getting busier and busier as the network grows. Beyond organising and participating in all of the meetings, the co-convenors carry out some of the support functions too, such as running the website, organising and writing up notes from meetings, managing the Twitter account and producing the members' Bulletin. The practical support by CUKT includes managing mailing lists and member bookings for most network meetings, helping with occasional facilitation and with the design and publication of some of the outputs.

It seems that at this point the funding and practical support arrangements of ABW are mostly in alignment with the network's profile, size and activities, but this is currently under review. Whilst there are some benefits to a 'low-maintenance' model, operating on a shoestring may not prove sustainable, and the co-convenors are aware that a lot more could be achieved in stimulating connection and activity across the network and extending its influence if resources allowed more distribution of tasks.

The co-convenors argue that shifting to an 'enterprise model' that charges members and undertakes more active fundraising might perhaps offer more sustainable longer-term funding, but would itself be resource-intensive beyond current capacity. An alternative option might be to test growing a supporting arrangement, perhaps through a consultancy model, paid from grant funding. The convenor role for the North of England has been tested in a similar way, facilitated by funding by the John Ellerman Foundation. Further one-year funding for that role was subsequently provided by Power to Change.

Effecting change

The small group of people who came together to found ABW in 2016 concluded that the most likely format suitable for pursuing their agenda was a network. Networks are known to be harder to evaluate than projects or organisations, for several reasons: as we have seen, they tend to be more organic and relationships-based, work on longer timescales and their influence can be harder to attribute. ABW's co-convenors acknowledge that it is not always easy to identify an audit trail to particular outcomes, especially for a principles-based network such as ABW, nevertheless, it can claim advancing and contributing to their achievement.

Co-convenors saw routes to effecting change on a number of levels:

1) at ground level, which can lead to change in a variety of ways; one of the most fundamental ways is through members' own work. As discussed before, all interviewed leaders were able to connect at least some of the ABW principles directly to their organisation's work. For example, in relation to 'principles, not targets', one interviewee

described their organisation's intention of moving from targets to principles in their next strategic plan, noting how the COVID-19-crisis highlighted the superiority of setting out and following your principles and values in your work, as compared with the managerial aim of meeting your targets. Another, related, example is Shelter, a large service delivery and policy organisation, which decided to put the principles of *A Better Way* into practice, led by chief executive and ABW member Polly Neate¹⁵.

A Better Way also inspired some members to start their own local initiative. One example is the 'informal think tank' that Cate Newnes-Smith, CEO of Surrey Youth Focus, started with representatives of a range of local organisations, including the police, children's services, the headmaster of a local school, as well as ABW national co-convenors. The 'think tank' explores the question why some children don't thrive – using appreciative inquiry, radical listening, systems change thinking and other tools that aid open conversations and deep reflection. *Time for Kids*, 'a movement that is building momentum across the Children's System in Surrey'¹⁶ has emerged as a result, uniting all those working with children around five principles that put children in the centre.

2) through initiatives with national influence, led by ABW members, inspired and supported by ABW. ABW support often involves linking up the leaders of such initiatives with potential funders, as in the case of The Relationships Project¹⁷ and Good help, bad help¹⁸, alongside providing space for reflection on

the core ideas in ABW meetings. Another example is the Power Sharing Project¹⁹, led by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK). Sue Tibballs, SMK's CEO, is also the thought leader on ABW's national cell on social power, which in turn provides a wider platform for the project, whilst Caroline Slocock is a member of the SMK project advisory group.²⁰

3) via other networks, that many ABW members are also members of, run, or host. This opens up an opportunity for ABW to link up with such networks and reach many more people and organisations, helping them to align their thinking and to enrich their work. An example of this was ABW and Community Organisers running a joint online national conference in 2020, another example was Caroline Slocock feeding ABW thinking into the leadership course, New Social Leaders, being run by the Local Area Coordination Network.

4) via inputs into national policy initiatives, mostly by leaders and members of ABW, but in some cases, ABW as a network putting forward its suggestions. Examples of the former include Steve Wyler and ABW member Asif Afridi contributing to *Civil Society Futures*²¹ and Children England CEO and ABW founding member Kathy Evans leading on the *ChildFair State Inquiry*²². ABW member Karin Woodley, whose call for radical listening has been mentioned earlier, was invited by the UK Department of Culture, Media & Sport to talk about her work.

15 Neate, P. *How Shelter is putting Better Way leadership principles into practice*. Blog for Civil Society, 9 July 2019 <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/voices/polly-neate-how-shelter-is-putting-better-way-leadership-principles-into-practice.html> [Accessed 24 January 2021]

16 See <https://www.surreyyouthfocus.org.uk/time-kids> [Accessed 21 February 2021].

17 See <https://relationshipsproject.org/about/> [Accessed 23 November 2020].

18 See <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/good-and-bad-help-how-purpose-and-confidence-transform-lives/> [Accessed 21 February 2021].

19 See <https://smk.org.uk/about-us/power-sharing-project/> [Accessed 21 February 2021].

20 For further information on these examples, and for more examples, see <https://www.betterway.network/how-we-work> [Accessed 13 April 2021].

21 See <https://civilsocietyfutures.org> [Accessed 21 February 2021].

22 See <https://www.childrenengland.org.uk/childfairstate> [Accessed 21 February 2021].

ABW's influence was clear in the 2018 Civil Society Strategy²³ led by Danny Kruger MP, a founding member. ABW had held a roundtable to stimulate thinking for the Strategy. In 2020 Danny Kruger was asked by the Prime Minister to put forward proposals on how to sustain the community spirit seen during the lockdown. In response, ABW published its own set of suggestions on how the government could unlock the power of connection and community²⁴. As a members' Bulletin later notes, many of the suggested ideas were recognisable in the report *Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant*²⁵, including investment in social infrastructure, more collaboration and a connector-role, despite ABW not agreeing with everything in the report.²⁶ The short suggestions paper was also a notable example of ABW acting as an entity putting forward its members' suggestions, rather than influencing via its members. Another, earlier, example was ABW's input into the Labour Party's civil society strategy²⁷.

Over and above specific instances and initiatives to effect social change, following its theory of change, ABW has invested much of its resources in *building social capital*, particularly within the social

sector, and between the social sector and the state and private sectors. According to one of the national co-convenors, the importance of personal networks is often underestimated in the social and public sectors (whereas this is much better understood in the private sector) – attracting and linking members from these sectors together has been one of ABW's successes.



23 HM Government (2018) *Civil Society Strategy: building a future that works for everyone* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/732765/Civil_Society_Strategy_-_building_a_future_that_works_for_everyone.pdf [Accessed 21 February 2021].

24 The document is available here. [Accessed 21 February 2021].

25 Kruger, D. (2020) <https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/sites/www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Kruger%20.0%20Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities.pdf> [Accessed 21 February 2021].

26 A Better Way: Bulletin No 13 (October 2020) <https://www.betterway.network/bulletin-october-2020> [Accessed 21 February 2021].

27 Labour Party (2019) *From Paternalism to Participation* <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Labour-Civil-Society-Strategy-June-2019.pdf> [Accessed 15 March 2021].

Looking to the future

At the end of 2020, still in the midst of the largest public health, economic and social crisis for decades, learning from the last year of ABW activities was brought together in a new document, *Time for a change: A rallying call for a better way*.²⁸ The document has very much built on the values at the core of ABW, but it has made the case for change, and suggested ways forward, in a simpler, more urgent and more powerful way than before (as one of the interviewees put it, it is “quietly powerful”). The high-level model for change it offers up has four segments: putting relationships first; sharing and building power; listening to each other; and joining forces. The journey of discovery can be started at any segment and then ‘travel with others hopefully’, without pre-determined outcomes, towards a vision of building a fairer society in which everyone can enjoy a good life.

ABW itself intends to carry on as a network, at least for the next two years. The national co-convenors intend it to expand into, and put down deeper roots, in further parts of England, bring on board a more diverse membership (including more people from the public and private sectors and BAME groups), continue to distribute leadership across the network, improve communications, and perhaps most importantly, increase its influence and become more deeply embedded in systems’ and organisations’ ways of working. Some members hope that it stays “pretty much the same as it is now, in five years”.

Yet an uncertainty remains about how much a network can achieve in the face of the urgent, entrenched and systemic problems ahead. Will it be sufficiently concrete and valued to be able to drive change? Even if ABW retains the network form, the latest publication predicts that individual efforts to put the principles of ABW into practice will not be enough for fundamental change. This points towards more coordinated action, which may mean a larger and more firmly defined support structure and more time spent on influencing political decision makers, for both of which members and leaders have limited capacity at present. Consequently, shifting to more coordinated action could also mean that network membership becomes more resource-intensive, and that fewer resources go into relationship building and informal interactions between network members.

Networks have their own life-cycles. ABW is now a well-developed network that, over its life span, has grown organically, keeping relationships at its centre. It has changed as its own development and external circumstances have prompted it to, and it may need to change further. It is a network of leaders and deep thinkers who will evaluate its effectiveness in fulfilling its functions and make changes that will continue to serve its membership and their shared vision best.

28 A Better Way (2021) *Time for a change: A rallying call for a better way* <https://www.betterway.network/time-for-a-change> [Accessed 21 February 2021].

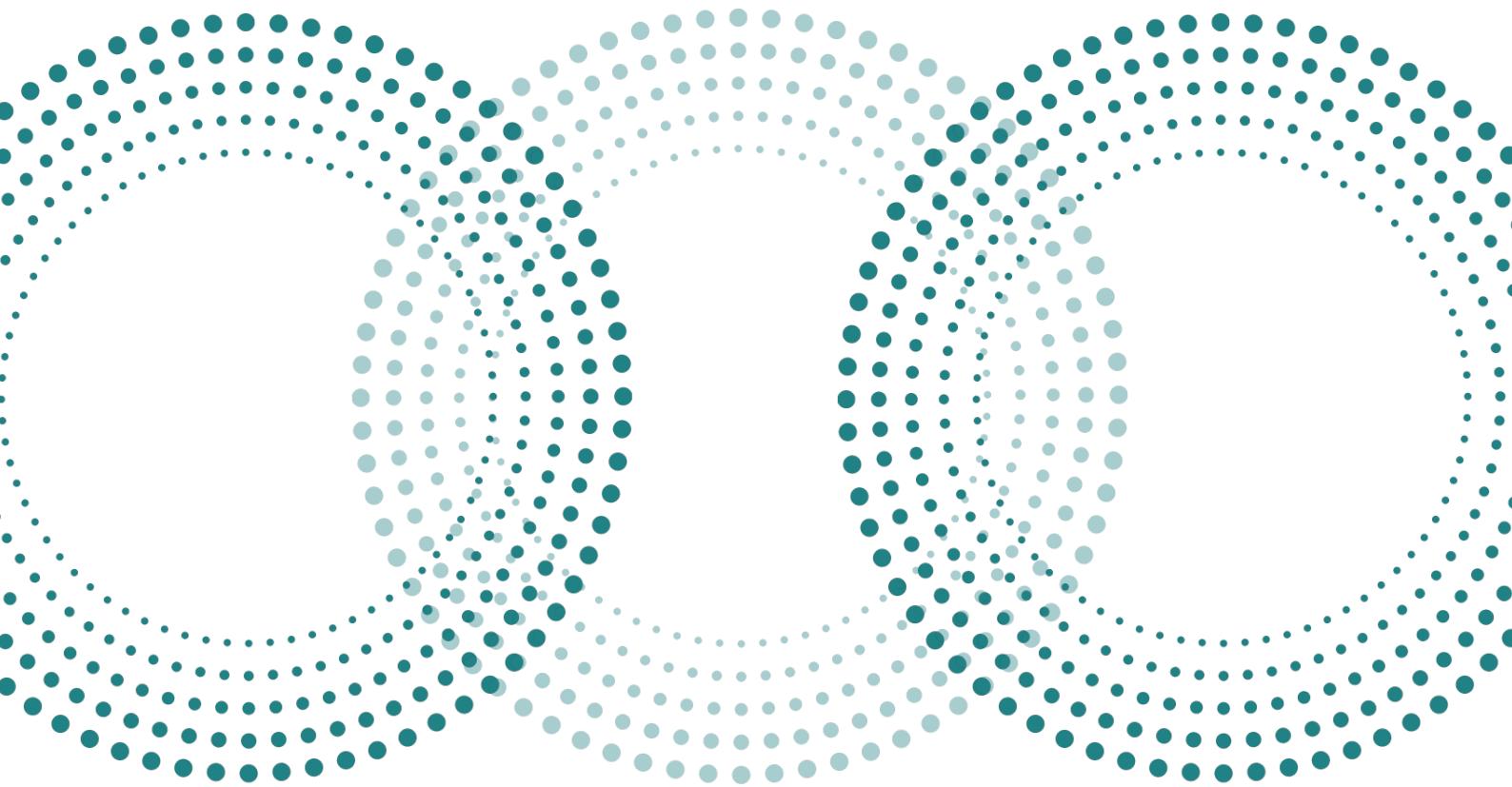


Appendix 1: Networks explainer: what they are and when to use them

The literature on networks²⁹ highlights a few key characteristics which help to decide when it is right to use a network approach rather than another organisational vehicle:

- A network is a distinct form of organisation, both from hierarchical organisations or projects – it is constituted through voluntary association of individuals or organisations.
- It connects people (or organisations) around specific issues or a set of values. Members will interact around a specific purpose; they will engage to the extent they trust that others will reciprocate.
- A network should be able to identify its purpose and what functions it will carry out to achieve that purpose (e.g. knowledge management; amplification of voices and advocacy; convening (among heterogenous members); community building (among homogenous members); mobilising resources).
- Network members' interactions and relationships are at the heart of a network. The informal relationships between members are more important than formal ones (although there can be different types or levels of membership). Networks often bring people together who already have a relationship.
- Networks are resource-intensive for members (in time, focus, expense) so they should continue to offer value. It should be clear how a network offers value: for example, whether it helps members to increase their own effectiveness, or it coordinates efforts towards achieving a shared purpose (or a mix of these).
- Alongside a degree of self-organisation, networks normally benefit from coordination and support by a person or organisation (which itself can be hierarchical and should not be confused with the network itself).
- Network leadership is different from that of hierarchies: more distributed, staying in the background, facilitating and empowering members' contributions, modelling the desired network behaviours, identifying breakthroughs and impact and building/preserving trust.
- Networks tend to be fluid and organic and can go through life cycles. Their trajectories and results are not easily predictable and may take some time to show. Their effectiveness should be looked at both in terms of their effectiveness as a network and achieving their purpose.

²⁹ Haslewood, I. (2021) *A review of the evidence on developing and supporting policy and practice networks*. <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/a-review-of-the-evidence-on-developing-and-supporting-policy-and-practice-networks> [Accessed 04 May 2021]



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