

It's all about power



**A guide to thinking differently about
power for solidarity in social change**



It's all about power

This guide is the culmination of a two-year collaborative inquiry, the Power Project, hosted by Sheila McKechnie Foundation.

In all, over 300 people contributed to this inquiry in big and small ways. We are incredibly grateful to everyone who has taken part in a workshop, responded to requests for conversations, interacted with blogs and newsletters and helped in countless ways.

While we at SMK take full responsibility for the contents of this guide, many different people and forms of knowledge have enriched our thinking. We are particularly grateful to all those who shared knowledge, insights and perspectives gained from their own first-hand experience of poverty and inequality.

This guide could not have been possible without the collaboration and contributions of our Core Learning Group, whose commitment to inquiring alongside us has shaped both the process and outcomes of this project:

Alice Smith	Bushra Ahmed	Dan Boyden
Lucie Russell	Mairead O'Siochru	Murshad Habib
Paula Harriott	Sophie Wills-Virk	Tony Cealy

Trust for London and City Bridge Trust funded the project through the Cornerstone Fund.

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

“Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity requires commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground.”

Sara Ahmed

Change-makers are passionate about what they do and want to get it done, for everyone’s sake. But trying to drive change on behalf of others isn’t working. In fact, it is perpetuating the very inequalities it is trying to address. Learning to work together, in active solidarity, when our experiences, insights and ideas might be very different, is hard – but it is a critical challenge of our time. We think understanding power can help.

The challenge facing the social sector is systemic – there is no one-size-fits-all approach. This guide shares insights and tools to help you see power more clearly. But transforming power dynamics, to achieve meaningful solidarity for more effective and more legitimate social change, requires a commitment from everyone.

Why power? makes the case for a conversation about power, and shares what we heard about people’s experience of engaging with the social sector.

See power introduces the Power Lens, a tool for seeing power in civil society more clearly.

Transform power introduces the Power Framework, a tool for creating a strategy to transform power in your work – and shares some suggestions for action revealed by our inquiry.

Unleash power is a call to reflective, responsive action – for each of us to play our part in building a powerful sector where everyone feels they can belong.

How to think differently about power is where you come in. We share some activities to help you think differently about power, and to achieve more meaningful solidarity in your work for social change.

Endnotes and a glossary are included at the end to point you to some of our sources, and definitions of some of the key words that feature in this guide.

Contents

Introduction	7	3. Transform power	43
Introduction	8	 Tools: The Power Framework	44
About the Power Project	11	 Insights: Taking action to transform power	46
Power and the Power Project	12	Develop consciousness and capabilities	48
Who is this guide for?	13	Share resources	52
1. Why power?	15	Create inclusive cultures	56
The lens of lived experience	16	Rethink policies and governance	61
Trying to share power	17	4. Unleash power	67
 Insights: Engaging with the social sector	18	Power, and opportunities for change, are everywhere	68
Why we need to talk about power	24	Towards a more powerful civil society	69
What is power?	26	5. How to think differently about power	71
Thinking differently about power	28	 Activities: Over to you	72
2. See power	31	Talk about power	74
 Tools: The Power Lens	32	See power more clearly	80
Individual power	34	Create a strategy to transform power	90
Collective power	36	Glossary	94
Civil society's power	38	Endnotes and further reading	96
Societal power	40	Acknowledgements	98
		Notes	99

Introduction

“Where we are born into privilege, we are charged with dismantling any myth of supremacy. Where we are born into struggle, we are charged with reclaiming our dignity, joy and liberation.”

Adrienne Maree Brown



Introduction

Something has shifted. Increasingly, social sector organisations are realising that old models of ‘charity’ and ‘philanthropy’ are no longer working.

The idea that people with ‘lived’¹ or ‘first-hand’ experience of poverty and other forms of inequality have an essential perspective on how best to change things – mostly unthinkable not so long ago – is now firmly on the table. People are speaking up, rightly making demands to be included. Many working within the social sector in their pursuit of change, hope to be better allies to those with first-hand experience, but don’t always know how best to go about it.

Over the last two years, the Sheila McKechnie Foundation has hosted an inquiry that began with the question, ‘How can we grow the voice of those with first-hand experience of poverty and inequality in social change?’

On the face of it, this was a good and simple question. But, in conversations with people from across civil society, it became clear it was not. In fact, in trying to answer it, every aspect of the question itself was challenged – from the language that frames it to the assumptions it reveals.

Those challenges shed light on how, despite good intentions, current attempts to work in solidarity with people with direct, first-hand experience of social issues often fall woefully short.

Those with first-hand experience told us that, too often, their experience is used in ways that are tokenistic, or even exploitative. The formal social sector is not always a welcoming place and examples of genuine, equitable partnerships are rare.

As a result, many people prefer to pursue change outside the social sector, to ensure their mission is not compromised and their experiences are not co-opted. Some are achieving considerable success. Imagine what could be achieved together.

What we have heard represents a critical challenge to the integrity and effectiveness of the social sector.

Anyone with experience of working for social justice will know that deep, systemic causes are at play. Systems are hard to change – the status quo tends to ‘snap back’. Changes to policy or practice alone rarely offer long-term solutions. Every part of the system needs to shift, including those who are working to make that shift happen.

Efforts to create lasting, systemic change are undermined whenever anyone unthinkingly amplifies negative stereotypes of victimhood, ‘deserving poverty’ or individual heroism. Too much focus on ‘empowering’ others can paradoxically reinforce an unequal relationship and, without a willingness to marshal resource and expertise in support, risks putting the burden of solving social issues directly on the shoulders of those most affected.

The challenge of creating a fairer, more equitable social sector is systemic. To create a systemic shift, we need a way to see the system more clearly. There is no better lens for this job than the lens of power.

All inequality, and all exclusion, is an inequality of power. It infuses and shapes every relationship and decision: between people, across networks, within and between organisations and institutions.

It’s all about power is an invitation to the social sector to join us in a project to see power more clearly and to develop stronger strategies to transform it. We have developed and curated tools to explore how power manifests in yourself and in the groups and organisations you are part of, and to consider how this power interacts with the structures and cultures of power in society.

Our *Social Power* report encouraged a more complex, systemic understanding of social change. We hope *It's all about power* will encourage a more complex, systemic understanding of power that will result in a fairer, more equitable social sector and a stronger civil society. Taken together, we believe they are the catalysts to unleash civil society's 'social power'.

The social sector can no longer act as the 'hero saviour' of Victorian philanthropic tradition. Instead, it needs to reimagine its work as an ally and partner. We believe that by embedding social justice and communicating an understanding of power for deeper solidarity in every part of the social change process, it can be more relevant, effective, and authentic. The result will be something that we sorely need in this moment – more human connections, stronger communities, and hope for change.

“This is the best and most significant conversation about power I’ve ever had. We are all engaged with power, but we just don’t talk about it.”

Project participant

About the Power Project

The Power Project, so far, has been a two-year inquiry into power in civil society.

The project was funded by the Cornerstone Fund, a funder collaboration set up to reduce inequalities and grow stronger, more resilient and thriving communities for a London that serves everyone. Our inquiry focused on London – England’s most unequal city – but drew on learning and conversations from around the world.

As hosts of the project, our role at SMK has been to convene different perspectives and make sense of what we heard.

We did this by:

- Establishing a diverse Core Learning Group, who met regularly to help steer the project and to guide, challenge and extend our thinking.
- Inviting people to join a Community of Practice (currently 300 strong), communicating our thinking and resources widely, through a digital pinboard, blog and e-newsletters.
- Hosting workshops for around 150 people – working in partnership with Community Researchers to reach local communities, working with staff from social sector organisations and campaign groups, and convening individuals from the Community of Practice.
- Conducting more than 50 interviews and informal conversations with people pursuing change from within their communities, social movements, social sector organisations and in academia.
- Undertaking a literature review of power and social change, from the UK and further afield.

All project participants contributing to workshops or the Core Learning Group, who were not joining as part of a salaried role, were paid for their time.

Power and the Power Project

We have been keenly aware of our power as hosts and authors of the project. SMK is a social sector organisation, and our core project team is female, predominantly white and university educated – reflecting the wider make-up of the social sector. While we have sought to interrogate and challenge our assumptions, our understanding can only ever be partial and situated in our own point of view.

Power is a complex and sensitive topic, open to multiple interpretations. Rather than define power, poverty, and inequality up front, we asked people to decide whether the inquiry was relevant to them. Our conversations quickly revealed how entwined poverty is with other forms of inequality – such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, classism, and others. In short, we heard how power and inequality manifest in real and sometimes devastating ways in people's lives.

The knowledge we have gathered is not 'fact' or 'truth', but personal experience and testimony. Our closest collaborators, our Core Learning Group, joined us for what became a courageous journey of personal and collective reflection. Insights from this journey have been instrumental to our understanding of solidarity as an active, collaborative process, requiring commitment and work.

The process of deciding what to share here – whose knowledge counts – has raised questions that cut to the heart of this inquiry. While our preference would be to value and acknowledge all sources equally, many project participants shared their experiences openly on the basis that quotes would be used but not named.

To make sense of what we heard, we read widely and drew on thinking from other contexts – particularly feminist activists in the global South. The sources we found most helpful are listed in the Further Reading section at the end of this guide.

Who is this guide for?

Anyone serious about social change can benefit from a better understanding of power. SMK champions civil society in all its forms – from large organisations to small neighbourhood groups. We hope this guide has value for everyone but, fundamentally, this is for people working in the social sector.

As our conversations unfolded, we repeatedly found significant challenges in the relationships between formal social sector organisations and people with first-hand experience of social issues. This guide suggests how we might address them.

The challenges are systemic. They can't be resolved by anyone in a single role (eg an Engagement Officer). Change requires a reimagining of relationships and processes both within and between organisations and communities, and a reckoning of the deep social inequalities that run through the very sector that exists to address them. Whether you work in service delivery, fundraising, communications, policy, leadership, governance, or grant-making, you have a role to play. We think understanding power can help.

“You can't put responsibility to fix a system on the people who are on the receiving end of it. People in positions of power need to take their responsibility seriously and use it well.”

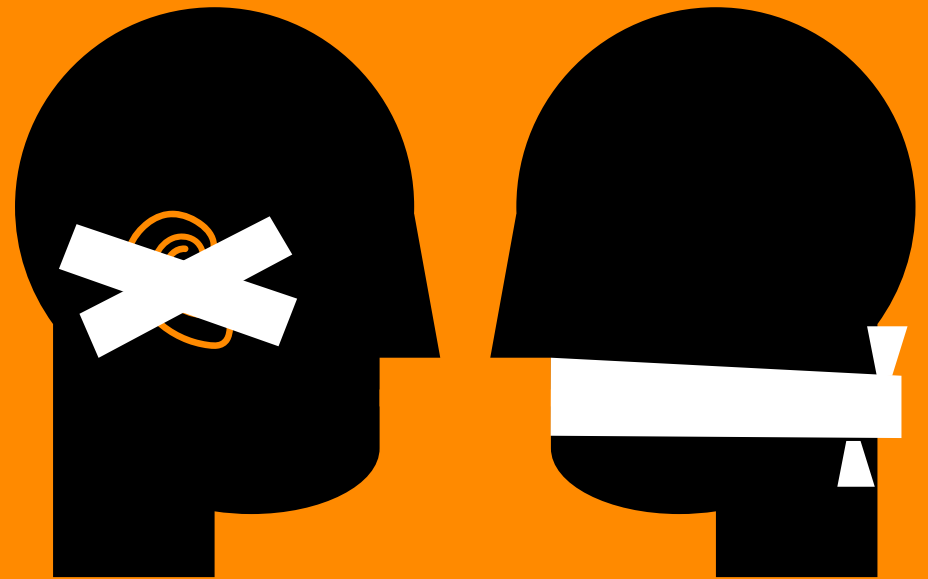
Project participant

Lots of people told us they didn't want a report, they needed a practical guide to action. This desire for straightforward solutions makes sense, but we have learned that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. So, this is not a 'how to' guide. We share insights and tools to help you see power more clearly and create a strategy to transform power, but then it's over to you to make the commitment, and do the work that's needed in your context, to achieve deeper solidarity for social change.

1. Why power?

“There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There’s only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

Arundhati Roy



The lens of lived experience

We started with the question, 'How can we grow the voice and influence of Londoners with lived experience of poverty and inequality?'

Everyone we spoke to agreed that the knowledge and insights of people with first-hand experience of social issues should be at the centre of solutions to poverty and inequality. 'Learned' or 'professional' knowledge is afforded greater status in our society, but it is insufficient when it comes to tackling entrenched problems. However, our question, and the assumptions it revealed, was challenged.

Not everyone we spoke to who had first-hand experience of poverty and inequality wanted to be labelled a person with 'lived experience'. Some reported having both 'lived' and 'learned' experience. Others questioned whose voices of those with first-hand experience are really seen to count, and how long insights from 'lived experience' could really be seen to last.

“The moment we develop professional skills our lived experience stops counting. We never forget how it feels to have the fear of poverty... the brown envelopes arriving.”

Project participant

Some people expressed concern that focusing on individual experience detracts from the collective, and political, causes of inequality.

We began to doubt our question. Who decides who is a person with lived experience, and when their experience counts? What does it mean to try and 'grow' someone else's voice and influence? We began to see how much the language – our language – around addressing inequality could be perpetuating it. We needed a new question, and a broader lens.

Trying to share power

In our early conversations, the theme of power was ever present. Who has power? How are they using it? Can it be shared? We reframed our question to ask, 'How can civil society be better at sharing power, and how could we get there?'

Once again, we hit the limits of our question. It implies that people with first-hand experience don't already have power and that they are somehow entirely separate from civil society. Civil society includes individual campaigners, community groups, global social movements, charities, religious groups and others. Among them are people with first-hand experience of inequality who are already driving change. They are doing so in both professional and voluntary capacities. It's simply not true that they are waiting for someone else to share power with them.

We found examples of people organising and campaigning in their communities, delivering or transforming services, shifting the dial on narratives in the media and public sphere, and influencing decisions and policies on a local and national level.

Throughout history, some of the most impactful change – from women's suffrage to Black Lives Matter – has been driven by people with first-hand experience of inequalities.

Transformative social change has overwhelmingly started in civil society – but not always in formal social sector organisations.



Insights: What we learned

Engaging with the social sector

We know that some social sector organisations led by people without first-hand experience of poverty and inequality are working in meaningful solidarity with individuals and communities to achieve social change together. But time and again we heard that this kind of positive engagement is the exception, not the norm.



Many people with first-hand experience feel excluded

Theoretically, the formal social sector offers access to funds, relationships and knowledge. Yet people told us they encounter barriers to accessing these resources, in the form of burdensome, impenetrable or impossible processes.

For many people, the sector is not a welcoming place to pursue change. Cultures, social networks, language and jargon exclude them, and their time and knowledge are not valued.

“If you don’t have resources, you can’t apply for funds. It’s a catch-22. Then the bigger organisations ride in and don’t notice what’s already happening on the ground.”

Project participant



Others choose to pursue change outside the sector

Some people opt out of engaging with social sector organisations, rather than compromise their mission or processes. They find the processes bureaucratic, hierarchical and at odds with the way they choose to organise. Funding processes are inaccessible, time-consuming, or come with strings attached.

These people are growing their own power, organising alongside others, influencing decision-makers, and making change in a multitude of ways.

“The system doesn’t want to share power with us, so we turn to ourselves to organise, and then we’re criticised for that. You’re damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

Project participant



Despite concern about better engagement, examples of genuine partnership are rare

The sector doesn’t look or sound like the communities it strives to work with, which damages both legitimacy and trust.

We heard that personal stories of first-hand experience are used by social sector organisations in tokenistic or exploitative ways. There was a perception that these stories were supporting fundraising efforts, but not achieving any real change.

We also heard how successes won by people outside the social sector can be co-opted by organisations for their own reputational gain.

Social sector staff told us they want to do better but cannot do so unilaterally – internal cultures, policies and practices work against them. Time, money, expectations and attitudes mean they struggle to create authentic spaces for collaboration. As a result, they are also unsure when it’s right to speak ‘with’ or ‘for’ people. And we heard different opinions from people with first-hand experience about whether it was OK for social sector professionals to advocate on their behalf.

“Lived experience becomes currency – it helps charities get into powerful spaces. But it isn’t people with lived experience who benefit from that.”

Bushra Ahmed, Core Learning Group



Opportunities for working together can create as many problems as they solve

People report being defined solely by their experience of a particular issue. Their stories are made useful to an organisation – often to fuel a campaign or fundraising drive. But they remain excluded from meaningful analysis, influence or decision-making, and from employment or governance opportunities.

“It’s really traumatic to have to testify over and over again. At the end of the day nothing changes, and you don’t really see anything shift. It’s not that it’s not well intentioned, I think it is. But who still holds the power at the end of that process?”

Alice Smith, Core Learning Group



Professionals’ perception of their own power does not always match the perception of others

Social sector professionals told us their hands are tied – by policy or processes beyond their control, a lack of time, or the requirements of funders. Those with first-hand experience expressed frustration that professionals often fail to acknowledge the power and privilege they do have.

This dissonance reveals the systemic nature of the challenge facing the social sector. Too often, individual staff are tasked with creating strategies for engagement and participation without the wider support, understanding or resources required for meaningful change.

“People don’t want to lose their power – but sometimes they don’t even know how much power they have. They’ve always had it and know no different.”

Project participant

“People seem to think we have power, but it’s such a big organisation, there’s so much bureaucracy. We don’t have the power people think we have.”

Project participant

Why we need to talk about power

Failing to bring first-hand and learned knowledge and experience meaningfully together diminishes everyone's power to shape the change we need. We think taking the time to understand power could be key to working out how to do better.

People working in the social sector, including us at SMK, already talk a lot about power. We talk about 'empowering people', 'speaking truth to power' and, of course, 'sharing power'. But these phrases can sound empty unless they're backed up by a more nuanced understanding of power, and meaningful action.

Talking about power can feel abstract, a distraction from the real work of social change. And it can be uncomfortable. But power is everywhere, and it affects everyone. All inequality, and all exclusion, is an imbalance of power – and that applies as much to the social sector as to society as a whole. Unless we take the time to understand it, we can't hope to transform it – and we'll continue making the same mistakes.

Just talking about power won't solve anything. But seeing imbalances of power more clearly, then taking reflective, strategic, power-aware action to shift that balance, just might.

We've come to believe in the power of having an honest conversation about power itself, and we hope this guide can ignite that conversation.

“Talking about power seems simple, but actually it's radical. It gets to the roots, shakes the foundations of the charity sector.”

Lucie Russell, Core Learning Group

What is power?

This is not the first attempt to understand power for social change.² There is a rich seam of thinking to draw on, and we can't hope to do all of it justice here. Power is understood by different people in different, and sometimes contradictory, ways. It's what academics call a 'contested term'. But drawing on this thinking has led us to think about power in a new way.

- **Power is the ability to create – or resist – change.** At its simplest, power is what we use to create or resist change, and what constrains our efforts to do so. It's what creates the barriers to inclusion in the social sector, and what we use to overcome them. Power itself is not 'good' or 'bad', it's neutral.
- **Power is systemic – it's everywhere.** It's woven through all our relationships, from the intimate or domestic to the regional and global. It's in our families, communities, and workplaces, as well as in the institutions where decisions are made. It affects, and is affected by, our feelings, cultural norms, the distribution of resources, and the formal rules and laws that govern us. Our position within this complex web of power affects both our experiences, and how we interpret them – and how we interpret other people's experiences too.
- **Power is dynamic – it's contextual and intersectional.** Power constantly shifts according to context and relationships. Someone who feels powerful in their family may feel powerless at work. Aspects of our identity such as race, class, gender and disability combine in ways that are intersectional, affecting our access to sources of power – things like money, technology, information and social networks.

- **Power is not finite – but it is accumulative.** Power is not a zero-sum game. If someone has more power, it doesn't follow that someone else must have less. But access to sources of power can generate more access to more power. You've heard the phrase 'money makes money'? That, but with all kinds of power sources. This means it can take more effort to shift a power dynamic than to maintain it – the status quo 'snaps back'.
- **Power is structural and cultural.** Power dynamics are formalised through social structures – institutions such as government, the law, the media, education and family. And they are upheld by the prevailing assumptions and social norms that shape how we make sense of ourselves and the world.
- **But power is also personal and interpersonal.** Most of us have experienced feeling both powerful and powerless as individuals in different situations. Sometimes that's because of our role or status in a group, or our relationship with another person, but sometimes it's more unexpected. For some, an experience of injustice becomes a source of power – driving a determination for change. For others, music, art or other creative or embodied experiences can spark the imagination and ignite a personal sense of power.

If we reject binary ideas about 'people with power' and 'people without', and instead look at the dynamic ways that power flows through and between us all, this creates a possibility. Power isn't something to be parceled out or shared, it is exercised.

So, every interaction or action in our daily lives is an opportunity to resist or transform power – even if only in a small way.

Thinking differently about power

When power is viewed in this complex, dynamic and multidimensional way, it is clear the social sector, and the people that work within it, have power. Sometimes, in the challenge of working for a more just society, this can be easy to forget.

Most often, we think of power as wielding **'power over'**³ someone or something – through authority or force. But not all 'power over' is negative. A law that tells everyone to drive on the left is useful for keeping roads safer, for example.

Some people talk about 'taking power' rather than waiting for it to be shared, while others are concerned about repeating cycles and patterns of domination and oppression. But there are other expressions of power – and they deserve our attention.

- **Power to:** is our capacity to act – our agency or 'power to' create or resist change in our own situation. It begins with an awareness that taking action is possible, and grows when we acquire the skills, knowledge and resources to make that change.
- **Power with:** is the power of building shared understanding and taking collective action with others. That could be in a small way, or as part of a million-strong social movement.
- **Power within:** is a sense of dignity, confidence and self-esteem. In a way, it describes our relationship with ourselves. A degree of 'power within' is essential if we are to imagine different possibilities, or to exercise our 'power to' or 'power with' others.
- **Power for:** is our sense of purpose – the vision, values and demands that orient and motivate our work. It's our relationship to the 'why' and 'how' of our work for change.

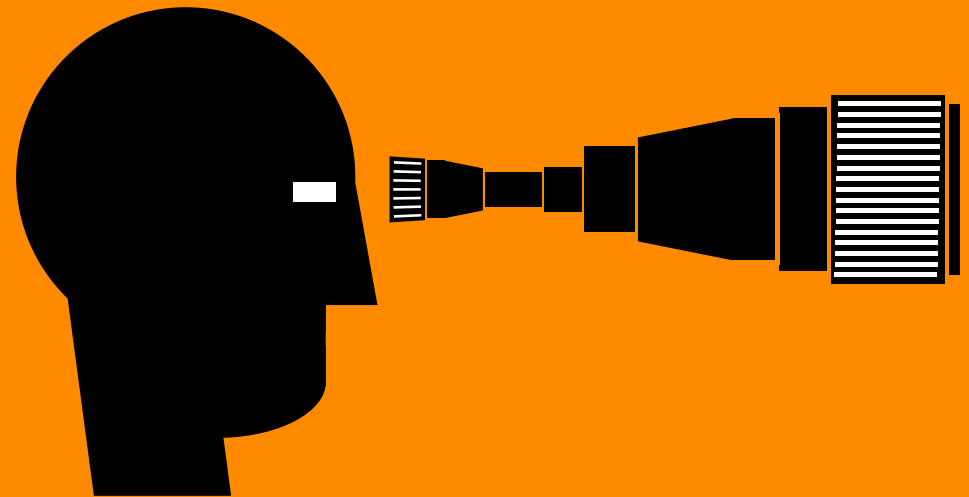
Recognising these different expressions of power creates another possibility. Rather than talking about trying to share power, it becomes possible to think much more specifically about how to use the power we have to create the conditions that support the change that's needed. This means identifying and exercising the power we have to challenge inequalities of power within the sector itself – and making conscious choices about who to grow power with and what to use power for.

But we can only act intentionally to change what we can see. Power is so complex, and so pervasive, we need to hold a Power Lens to civil society – to see the complex, dynamic and multidimensional web more clearly, and set a path toward strategic, transformative action.

2. See power

“Power is about seeing where you are, where you want to go and how others can help you.”

Project participant





The Power Lens

The Power Lens is a tool to help people see how power is woven through all our relationships in civil society more clearly. It offers a bird's eye view to make sense of our place – and our power – within it.

The lens reveals how power exists as nested systems – from the individual, to the organisational or 'collective', through civil society and society as a whole. As a tool for reflection, it can help us consider the power dynamics that operate between us as individuals, within and between different organisations and groups, and through the wider structures and cultures of society that permeate it all.

By reminding us that power exists within each sphere of the nested systems, with each of us as individuals at the centre, it helps us to see the whole picture – and to locate our efforts within a wider ecosystem of power and change.

In turn, this can help us acknowledge the limits of our own individual position, and the limits of our own power and perspective. Armed with this knowledge, we can actively seek out different actors to bring a different perspective and access to different sources of power, to work together for more effective change.



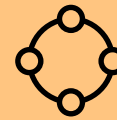
Individual power

Personal and positional sources of power



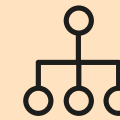
Collective power

Organisations, communities, social movements



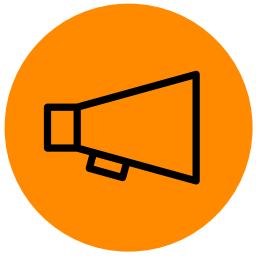
Civil Society's power

'Social power': the power of civil society to drive change



Societal power

Structural and cultural power in society influences actions and interactions on all levels



Individual power

At the heart of the Power Lens lies each of us as individuals. Who we are, and where in the system we are, affects our power.

Our formal position or role within an organisation or group will influence our access to sources of power, such as information, money, technology, social networks and decision-making forums. If something changes – we lose our job or home or become ill, for example – our position shifts.

Individual power is different in different contexts. And our 'position' in relation to the wider systems of society affects our power. Some are born into lives rich in resources and connections while, for others, aspects of social identity – such as gender, race, class or disability – combine and intersect, creating barriers to accessing sources of power that others may not even be aware exist.

Sometimes people have power within themselves that seems to defy their position – there are countless examples of people campaigning for change when the odds seemed stacked against them.

“I’ve spent lots of time trying to empower people, but I’ve found lasting change has to come from within.”

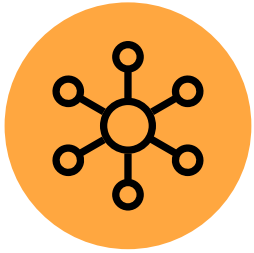
Project participant

By revealing how interlinked individual power is to wider systems of power, the Power Lens requires that we think carefully about what it means to ‘empower’ someone.

“Empowerment classes can lead to serious problems. People are told they have the power to change the world. No, you don’t have that power. The systems are against you. People can internalise that and blame themselves.”

Project participant

A lot of social sector organisations aim to empower other people. But, seen in this light, empowerment is an ongoing process that requires shifts on both the individual and societal level. It requires the capacity to imagine a different possibility, to feel and grow a sense of ‘power within’, and to take action to change power dynamics at the collective and societal level.⁴



Collective power

When individuals join forces, we can share resources and access to social networks, provide mutual support and generate new knowledge together. In this way, our collective ‘power with’ others can grow.

Social movements and community organising are both ways in which people in civil society with first-hand experience of inequality and injustice gather together around a common cause or purpose to grow their collective power.

When social sector professionals work together as part of a formally constituted organisation, this is another form of ‘collective’ power. Individuals in the organisation can benefit from shared access to resources and other sources of power. The difference is that sometimes access to those sources of power is not available to people outside the organisation, those with first-hand experience of the social issues they are trying to address.

Whenever we join forces – whether as an informal group or movement, or a formal organisation – power dynamics form. These dynamics are not inherently negative, but they can work to exclude people in obvious and more subtle ways. It can be helpful to learn to spot them.⁵

Visible power includes the structures and processes we can see. It’s who has a seat at a decision-making table, a job title, or access to a computer. Organisational processes and hierarchies are attempts to formalise power dynamics and ensure they are accountable, but this is not the only way that power operates.

“They all had job titles with their names on Zoom. I don’t think anyone realised how that feels when you don’t have a job.”

Project participant

Hidden power happens behind the scenes. An email exchange that sets the agenda before a meeting, jargon, acronyms and social codes or conventions, obvious to some but not to others, are all ways that power can exclude people with first-hand experience.

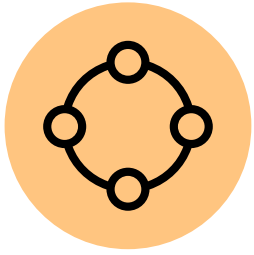
“They were speaking in acronyms. I couldn’t de-code what they were saying. At first I thought it was just me who didn’t understand.”

Project participant

Invisible power is internalised power. It shapes what feels ‘normal’ or acceptable, influencing how each of us feels about ourselves and whether our opinions and contributions have value.

“It isn’t enough to invite people who then don’t feel comfortable to speak.”

Bushra Ahmed, Core Learning Group



Civil society's power

Throughout history, civil society, in its widest sense, has been the source of significant, transformative social change. At SMK, we call the power of civil society, working at its best and without constraint, social power.

Constraints to civil society can come from beyond the sector – from wider systems such as political institutions, the public sphere or corporate interests. But sometimes, social power is constrained by processes, relationships and power dynamics within the sector itself.

“People in organisations are attracted to other people in organisations... Everyone else is silenced as a normal part of how things happen.”

Sophie Wills-Virk, Core Learning Group

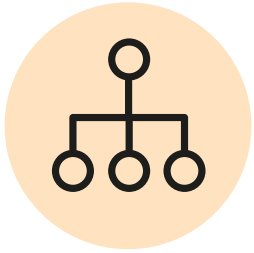
To be truly effective at driving social change, different actors and groups need to be able to work together effectively. This can and does happen – ‘white label’ campaigns are examples of social sector organisations collaborating and pooling resources to increase impact. Social sector responses to Covid, from community groups to funder coalitions, are testament to the fact that organisations can work together effectively in a crisis, especially where pre-existing relationships exist.

But power exists between organisations and groups as much as within them. Different groups may have competing agendas, or those with similar agendas may find themselves competing for funds. Like tends to work with like, and certain causes are favoured over others.

“There’s a lack of analysis of the field... the big players parachute into an area that’s already rich in activity and activism.”

Project participant

The interests of funders, and other more powerful groups in the sector, dominate the agenda – determining the how, as much as the what, of social change. And larger organisations can squeeze out smaller groups entirely.



Societal power

Surrounding and permeating each of the other systems of the Power Lens are the structures and cultures of power in society. This creates a dynamic tension, with societal power influencing – and being influenced by – individuals, the organisations and groups they form, and civil society as a whole.

Formal structures of power include institutions we all tend to associate with power – government or the judiciary. The decisions and policies that these institutions enact can affect everyone, sometimes for generations to come. Changing these structures, by challenging a law or policy decision, is the focus of many social change efforts. But sometimes structures are imposed that represent a direct challenge to civil society itself – the Lobbying Act and anti-advocacy clauses are two examples.

The so-called ‘soft power’ of cultural and societal norms also profoundly influences each sphere of the Power Lens. Some social change initiatives focus directly on challenging these powerful narratives, but cultural assumptions also influence civil society – affecting which issues achieve public attention.

“A lot of activism is co-opted by systems of oppression – capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy – simply by virtue of the fact that everything exists within that structure.”

Paula Harriott, Core Learning Group

Power exerted by global corporate and financial interests is sometimes called ‘shadow power’. This can be hard to pin down, but with its capacity to erode democratic institutions and manipulate public opinion, it’s a concern for those working for social change.

The social sector exists to address structural and cultural power in society but, as our inquiry has shown, sometimes it perpetuates them. Groups such as Charity so White⁶ have emerged to tackle institutional racism and challenge the structures and cultures of power from within the sector. Much more is needed, and everyone in the sector has a role to play.

3. Transform power

“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.”

Alice Walker





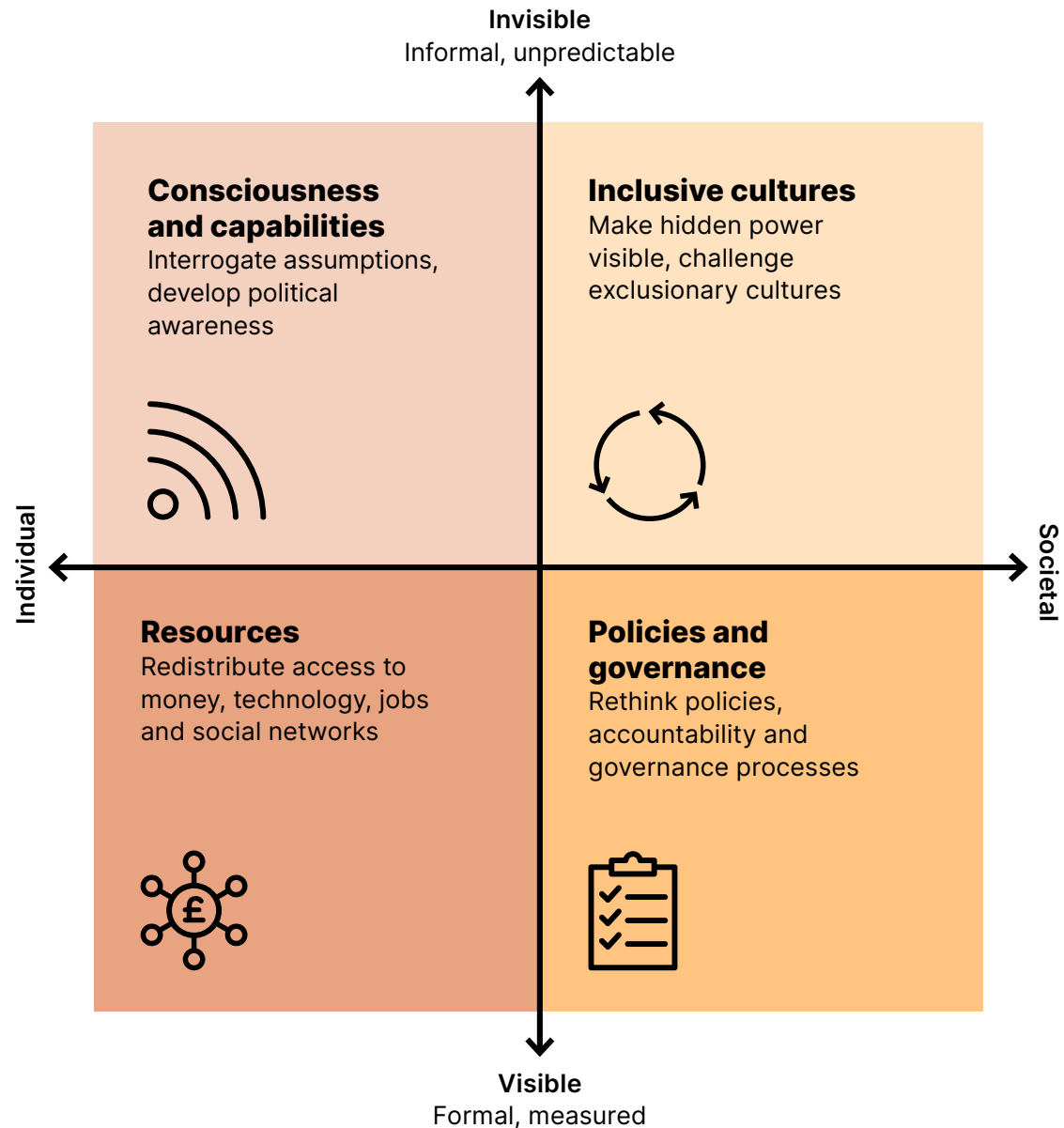
The Power Framework

The Power Framework⁷ is a tool for informing and planning strategic action to reshape power in social sector organisations. It can be used to reveal the barriers and opportunities for achieving deeper solidarity, and to map a path to system-wide change.

In the Power Framework, each quadrant reveals a different dimension of power across two axes – from the individual to the societal, and from the formal to the informal.

This reminds us that power exists in the distribution of resources and in the formal rules, policies and governance process we enact. But it also forces us to pay as much attention to aspects of power that may be invisible, hidden and harder to predict – to individual consciousness and capabilities and to the cultures we form when we gather and work together.

By showing how power exists across all these dimensions, the Power Framework reminds us that power is everywhere – so strategies for change can begin anywhere.





Insights: What we learned

Taking action to transform power

Seeing power more clearly, as the Power Lens helps us to do, is critical but it's not enough. To achieve deeper solidarity for social change – we need to take action to transform the power dynamics and processes that are getting in the way.

We explored the Power Framework as part of a deep dive into power with our Core Learning Group, and in conversations and workshops with others. We heard that there are lots of concrete, tangible steps that can be taken to transform power in each domain – to develop consciousness and capabilities, share resources, create inclusive cultures, and rethink policies and governance processes.

In this section, we shine a light on each dimension of the Power Framework in turn. We think it provides a useful organising frame to share the insights and ideas we heard.

The ideas are not intended as a comprehensive checklist, but as a source of inspiration and reflection. The steps you will need to take will be specific to your situation. In Chapter 5 we will help you to use the Power Framework to create your own plan for strategic action.



Develop consciousness and capabilities

We are all entangled⁸ within the systems of power we are seeking to transform. Our own power and situation influence how we understand and interpret others'. So, each of us needs to get better at seeing how power affects us all. This means committing to interrogating our own consciousness, capabilities and hidden assumptions, before we begin to consider those of others.



Start with yourself

Reflect on what you hope to use your power for and why (there are exercises to help in Chapter 5).

Acknowledge the limits of your own (or any) individual point of view and actively seek out different perspectives. Practise 'listening to understand' and be willing to be 'checked' on your assumptions and behaviour.

"If someone is bringing their lived experience to the table, don't bring your assumptions of what that might be."

Project participant

Get comfortable with feeling uncomfortable

Questioning things we take for granted is never easy, but it is an essential part of transforming the power dynamics that cause inequality and exclusion.

To really value knowledge and insights gleaned from first-hand experience can be hard for people who have invested energy and resources in academic learning or in a career in the social sector – but it is essential.

"These conversations cut to the heart of the charitable sector. We need to hold the mirror up to ourselves."

Murshad Habib, Core Learning Group



Use reflective and creative approaches

Power works in both conscious and unconscious ways. Reflective writing, music, art and drama – experiencing it and creating it – can help each of us to tap into the unconscious and invisible ways that power affects us all.

There are some brilliant organisations and individuals using creative methods to help people and communities grow their power. These methods could also support social sector professionals to reflect on their power.

“You can’t think your way into feeling differently about power.”

Project participant

Create space for collective reflection and political awareness

Poverty and inequality can cause feelings of shame, stigma and personal responsibility. People can’t always identify the underlying structural issues that impact them. Meeting and reflecting with others with shared experiences is one way to locate individual experiences within a wider political context.

This, in turn, can promote collective understanding and generate possible solutions. Supporting people to shape solutions that are ambitious but achievable can be more constructive than promising them they can change the world if only they ‘believe in themselves’.

“When you’re struggling with any kind of disadvantage you feel totally alone. Bringing people together – that is power.”

Project participant



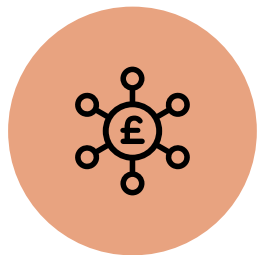
Ask people, and keep asking, what matters to them

Not many people are entirely comfortable in a new or unfamiliar environment. Give people the best chance of bringing their most thoughtful selves to a conversation by sharing your questions in advance. Allow them space to develop new ideas or change their minds.

Be alert to the power dynamic between different roles and positions. Seek out alternative ways for people to be involved that go beyond sharing stories of hardship. Work together to identify needs, plan, take action and reflect on success – and ensure people have the power to choose.

“The first time someone is asked, ‘Who are you?’ they might not know how to respond. How we listen will affect how people tell their story.”

Dan Boyden, Core Learning Group



Share resources

Our early conversations about ‘sharing power’ focused on sharing resources. It’s only part of the picture, but when it comes to transforming power and achieving deeper solidarity, distributing resources more fairly is essential.



Pay people

Expertise has value, whether it draws on first-hand or learned experience, or both. If paying money might cause someone problems, ask them what would work for them instead.

“I gave hours and hours to an organisation talking about poverty. Then they gave me a £10 voucher – frankly that’s an insult.”

Project participant

Think of the cost of participation as essential, not an extra

No one can be expected to contribute their best ideas if they are hungry, tired or traumatised. Do all you can to ensure basic needs are met. Where organisations have reasonable operating costs, this kind of spending should be taken for granted and built into fundraising expectations.

Ask people what they need to be able to participate in a project – everyone’s barriers will be different. Travel expenses, internet or childcare costs paid in advance, or meeting at a different place or time of day, could make a difference.

“You can’t expect someone to tell their story on TV if they haven’t slept or had breakfast... it’s just pornography of suffering.”

Sophie Wills-Virk, Core Learning Group



Take a broad view of resources

Resources such as technology, funds, social networks and jobs may be taken for granted by those that have them. Those that don't might rely instead on mutual aid, or creative responses. Each could benefit from understanding each other's perspective on resources.

Take the time to discover what's happening 'on the ground' – before determining what resources are available and how best to apply them.

“We need what we've got inside our hearts and minds to make sure the structural things – the money, the space – are used in a healthy way.”

Tony Cealy, Core Learning Group

Invest in generating and sharing knowledge for change

The social sector does not have a monopoly on doing good, but it does exist for good alone. It has the potential to be a repository of long-term thinking, in-depth knowledge and skills for social change that could benefit all civil society.

To fulfil this potential would require a shift in funding priorities, away from project-based, outcome-driven resources to funding thinking time, and flexible, exploratory work. It would also require some careful consideration about what it means to generate and share learning in a context of 'knowledge equity'.⁹

“How do we divert resources away from saviourism, how do we get upstream of this? Why are we always just picking up the damage?”

Paula Harriott, Core Learning Group



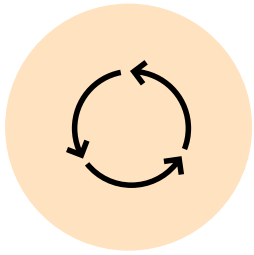
Support funders to adopt participatory approaches

Funders play an important role in creating the conditions for a more equitable social sector. Some are reflecting on the power inherent in their role, exploring partnership-based approaches centred on dialogue and trust, and experimenting with more flexible, longer term and emergent funding strategies.

Not everyone has the power to determine funding policy and practice, but anyone can gather and share evidence to support that shift. Try to develop an honest relationship with funders, make the case for more participatory approaches and gather evidence of success.

“With Covid, no one had time to be bureaucratic. They just gave people money. And it worked – they discovered what they hadn't been seeing.”

Project participant



Create inclusive cultures

Perhaps the most intractable domain of power in any organisation is the culture. The deeply ingrained assumptions, practices, behaviours and relationships – the ‘rules of the game’, obvious to some but not to others – which maintain the status quo. Shifting this culture requires diligent effort to make it visible, to challenge exclusionary cultural practices and create a new, inclusive, story.



Take the time and space needed to grow trust

Inequality in the social sector is complex, sensitive and deeply ingrained. Factor in the time it takes to bring people together and develop meaningful, trusting relationships from the start. Schedule opportunities for ongoing conversation – don't leave it to chance. Move 'at the speed of trust' and invest time and energy in developing a supportive, welcoming culture.

“Work with people from beginning to end. Stay in touch, keep connected. One bad day can change everything – people with lived experience will need your support.”

Project participant

Challenge and disrupt exclusionary cultures in society

Stories and images that evoke pity to generate funds have been justified as a means to an end, but they feed into negative stereotypes and reinforce social narratives (eg 'deserving' versus 'undeserving') that perpetuate inequality.

Instead, social sector organisations have a responsibility to use their platforms to tell more authentic and nuanced stories, to challenge stereotypes and improve representation in the public sphere – or use their resources to create platforms for others.

“Now we don't shut up... I'm proud of what we've achieved. We're breaking down barriers. People don't usually get to see stories of people getting out of their situation and doing something positive.”

Project participant



Make hidden and invisible power visible

Remember the discussion about different forms of power on page 37? Look for ways that hidden power is influencing the agenda – how social codes, clothing, language or jargon might be alienating or excluding people. Making power visible can make it easier to address.

Calling out inequalities of power can be risky – there is no right way to do it. Some people choose to 'be an irritant' or to challenge directly. Others seek to bring people round to their point of view. We've come to think we need both.

Be alert to invisible power, and the possibility that everyone's experiences and stories are heard, and filtered, through our own internalised beliefs and assumptions.

“Introductions draw the line in the sand – professionals always introduce themselves with their roles. Sometimes, what's brought us to the space is a traumatic experience – I'm almost silenced in the introduction.”

Project participant



Pay attention to the culture within your organisation

Among the staff team, a person's job title, personality, personal relationships and identity will affect whether their voice is heard and has influence. Competing organisational priorities can mean the needs and interests of certain individuals or teams, such as fundraising, might dominate the agenda.

Ideally, people with first-hand experience are in paid roles at all levels of a social sector organisation and are engaging with colleagues in every department.

If this is a long way from the reality of your organisation, a first step is for frontline staff, and those tasked with participation and engagement, to be properly resourced and supported, with access to decision-making spaces. Otherwise, the interests of people with first-hand experience will be in danger of being utterly overlooked. We heard of staff adopting organising tactics, growing their collective power to influence decision-makers and ensure the interests of the people they work with make it onto the agenda.

“We need to be shape-shifters – we try to be self-organising but we need to explain that to those in the organisation who value traditional structures.”

Project participant



Contribute to a culture of co-operation across civil society

It takes time to develop trust between organisations of different shapes and sizes, particularly when community-led groups have been let down by larger organisations before. Investing in relationships can make it possible to move more quickly when an opportunity – or a challenge, such as Covid – arises.

Good partnerships can enhance the capacity of each organisation and effect change across a network, but only if all parties are willing to have honest conversations about power and levels of resource. Effective partnerships include staff buy-in and relationships at all levels, agreed decision-making processes, and a focus on the value each person can bring. These are all more important than the size or capacity of the organisation.

“When it comes to social change there is a collective responsibility which is almost like a human body – everyone has a different role, but we function as one body with collective responsibility.”

Project participant



Rethink policies and governance

Formal structures, policies and governance are means of making power visible. They exist to mitigate against abuses of power, holding organisations and the people who work in them to account. And yet, if poorly designed or overly bureaucratic, these same processes can (and do) exclude the very people that organisations need as partners in change.



Improve recruitment policies to unblock routes to employment

Sharing resources more fairly isn't just about removing barriers on a project-by-project basis. It's also about creating organisations that are more permeable, with recruitment (whether for paid or voluntary roles) designed with people with first-hand experience in mind.

If you are recruiting for a paid job, advertise pay scales up front. Remove identifiers from application forms before shortlisting. Consider more flexible employment policies that allow your organisation to benefit from diverse expertise. Think carefully about what skills, experience and education are genuinely essential for the role.

“We’ve come from a background where we’ve been told we’re never going to do well... give us the opportunity – trust me, we’ll take it and run with it.”

Project participant



Devolving decision-making is risky – but so is trying to maintain control

Social sector organisations are rightly held to high standards of accountability to protect the public from abuses of power. But bureaucratic working practices and accountability mechanisms that are primarily about reducing risk, rather than increasing trust, stand in the way of meaningful participation.

Shifting power to people with first-hand experience means letting go of control to some extent. But not letting go, on the basis that it's too risky, ignores the fact that failing to meaningfully involve people is itself a significant risk. Being alienated from people whose knowledge and experience is essential to transformational change-making prevents organisations from fully playing their own role in much needed change.

There are no straightforward solutions. Make the tension between confidence and control a topic of reflection and conversation between everyone. By teasing out some of the issues, and considering where more flexibility is possible, organisations could alleviate fears and generate useful insights.

“There’s a real issue about control – mitigating risk is essential.”

Lucie Russell, Core Learning Group

“Your risk is huge if you don’t involve people. People power is growing – the charity sector will implode.”

Bushra Ahmed, Core Learning Group



Put power analysis at the heart of governance

Recent changes to the Charity Governance Code explicitly require boards to assess and address power dynamics where they exist, in both the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and Integrity Principles.¹⁰

Including power analysis as part of organisational integrity is a significant shift. It requires an explicit awareness of how power affects all parts of an organisation's work in interconnected ways, from recruitment to working culture, to understanding unintended consequences of activities, to managing risk.

“People aren’t seeing that power underpins issues of race, gender, and ethics. There’s a disconnect in knowledge – we need trustees to start seeing the whole.”

Project participant



Go beyond providing a seat on the board for people with first-hand experience

Bringing knowledge and insights based on first-hand experience into decision-making spaces is essential. But bringing a single person with that experience onto a board and expecting them to contribute without support or training – or to represent everyone with experience of the issue – is irresponsible.

Go further. Think about what it would take to make your organisation as permeable to first-hand expertise as it is to learned expertise. Boards need to be on your list, but what about jobs, other voluntary roles, project oversight, strategy development, horizon scanning, or skills development?

“We’re talking about the integration of insights from lived experience into the design of the world. This is usually the domain of the privileged... How do we get into those spaces?”

Paula Harriott, Core Learning Group



Challenge societal rules and policies – protect civic space

The barriers to equitable change-making partnerships do not lie solely with individuals and organisations. They are also systemic across society. It is to address these deeper, fundamental inequalities in society that people organise – constantly reinventing and renewing the fabric of civil society.

A functioning civil society able to pursue deep, systemic change is essential to our democracy and ability to hold decision-makers to account. It is where new ideas are born, tested and evolve. It is a place of energy, creativity and mutual support. Every social sector organisation needs the civil society it exists within to be healthy and free of unreasonable constraint.

Social sector organisations should consciously consider how they will help to tackle systemic inequalities and keep civil society in good shape.

Do not confuse being ‘political’ with being ‘party political’ – they are not the same. If your mission is to create a society that is somehow fairer or better, then ‘being political’ is part of that mission. Be clear where your red lines are, help people to understand them, and encourage them to speak up with confidence. Use your platform, connections and influence to protect the civic space in which all of civil society is working.

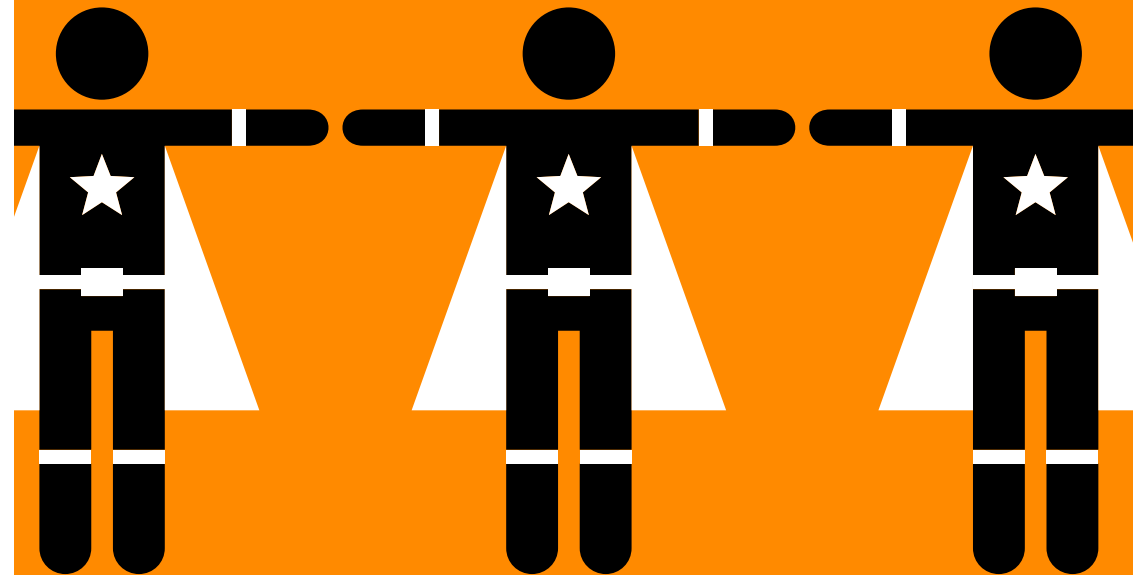
**“Charities need to be more political...
I want to be able speak more publicly
about the gaslighting that’s happening
in communities.”**

Project participant

4. Unleash power

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Lilla Watson



Power, and opportunities for change, are everywhere

The ideas about power we have explored in this guide aren't new. Activists and scholars have been thinking about power for decades. But they've been slow to gain traction in the social sector, perhaps because old ideas about power have an enduring power in themselves.

In an era shaped by rising inequality, populist politics and threats to civic space, getting better at understanding power is critical. Power, as we have described, is dynamic and multidimensional – each time it shifts, new opportunities for action emerge and old ones shut down. Across civil society in all its forms, we see people organising and mobilising on a new scale, enabled by technology and a more nuanced understanding of change.

We set out to understand how to 'grow the voice and influence of people with first-hand experience of poverty and inequality'. What we heard is that a systemic shift is needed in the social sector – that goes beyond instances of engagement to transform the way it sees, thinks about, and acts on power.

This can feel like an impossible challenge. The first step is to see how power is enacted by individuals and grown collectively through organisations and social groups. Watch for how power forms in visible and less visible ways, in the relationships between us and in the structures and cultural norms of society. Then think strategically about how to transform power in organisations – by raising individual consciousness and capabilities, sharing resources, creating more inclusive cultures and rethinking governance policies and processes.

If power is the cause of exclusion and inequalities in the social sector then, of course, the response needs to take all these things into account. No one person is responsible, but every single person can play a part.

Towards a more powerful civil society

Every action and interaction offers an opportunity, but the constraining structures are real. Without the commitment of funders and social sector leaders, the efforts of others will be frustrated or diminished. Truly transformative change requires a truly collective effort.

Our vision is of a powerful civil society, working together effectively and without constraint. It should be enabled by a social sector that accepts the power it has and uses it consciously and sensitively to unleash the power of all of us, to work together in solidarity, to effect the change we need.

“This is a key moment in history. The endings aren't hidden. There are opportunities to shape new beginnings, but we need to be mindful of what we create.”

Alice Smith, Core Learning Group

There is no doubt that this will feel uncomfortable at times. Mistakes will be made. We need to look after ourselves and each other and be willing to learn from those mistakes. That means putting care, connection and curiosity at the heart of any work for change.

Like empowerment itself, unleashing the power of civil society is a constant renegotiation. It involves re-envisioning a different world and changing the relations and mechanisms of power that maintain the status quo.

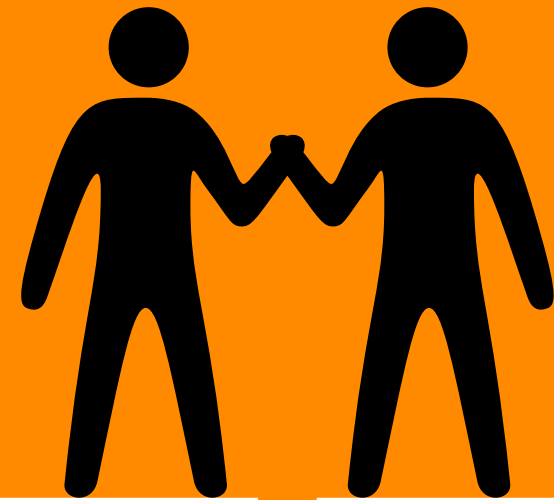
The tools and insights we have explored here are useful but, on their own, they are not enough. The shift needed requires each of us to reimagine our relationships and rethink our ways of knowing. It asks us to move forward together, in a spirit of not knowing together.

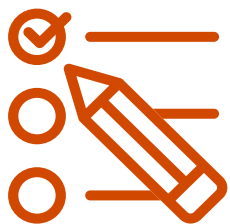
Adopting an attitude of inquiry is a deceptively radical act. There is no perfect response – ours or yours. But it is vital, for the future of the social sector, civil society, and the wider society we hope to build together, that we make a start.

5. How to think differently about power

“There’s a simplicity beyond complexity. Change begins in the conversations and relationships you have every day.”

Project participant





Activities: Over to you

How to think differently about power

The insights and tools we have introduced are designed to help you see power more clearly and take strategic action to transform it. But power is contextual, it plays out in different ways in different contexts. So now it's over to you.

In this chapter, we have designed and curated some activities to help you reflect on how power is at play in your work for change. We hope these activities will help you to think critically and reflectively about what is needed in your situation.

First, we'll consider what it means to talk about power, and how to do that in a way that feels safer. We'll introduce some techniques for challenging old ways of thinking about power, that you can use alone with a notebook and pen, in conversation with a friend or colleague, or with a group.

Next, we introduce some activities that correspond to each sphere of the Power Lens, to help you consider the power you have as an individual, the power dynamics within your organisation or group, how power is at play in your wider network for change, and how power in society affects you.

Finally, we talk through the Power Framework to help you start building a strategy to transform power in your work for change.

These activities can be applied to analyse and reflect on power in any situation. Here, we invite you to use them to contribute to achieving deeper solidarity for social change. None are set in stone. We've designed some, and adapted others – and we invite you to do the same. Keep in mind the process is as important as any outcome. Try them with an open mind and see what works for you.

Talk about power

Thinking differently about power means making power an object of attention and conversation. But thinking and talking about power can feel abstract for some and vulnerable, or even traumatic, for others. It's unlikely that 'a safe space' will look or feel the same for everyone, so it's important to look after yourself and each other.

Think about where your conversation will happen

If you are hosting a conversation about power, think about where it will take place. Spaces and places are infused with obvious and more subtle symbols of power – from the décor to the placement of chairs. It can be helpful to consider whether your conversation is to occur in a closed, invited or created space.¹¹

- **Closed spaces** are places where decisions are made, and conversations held, behind closed doors.
- **Invited spaces** are places where people are invited in – to participate in a one-off consultation, or in an ongoing way.
- **Created or claimed spaces** are those that people create or claim for themselves, to mobilise, organise or address a common concern.

There is no right or wrong, and these distinctions are blurred, shifting in different contexts and for different people. But bringing awareness to power in spaces can help to mitigate it.

Online meetings bring different power issues to the fore. While some are excluded when meetings shift to online spaces, others, such as carers, may be more able to participate. Online meetings can provide a window into a domestic space, revealing otherwise hidden symbols of power and privilege.

Whether your meeting is happening face-to-face or online, think about the people you'd like to join the conversation, and how to make the space feel safe and inviting to them.

Acknowledge your power as facilitator

Whoever calls a meeting, sets the agenda and designs the process is likely to have more power in the conversation.

This power can be used to facilitate a conversation that feels more welcoming, or to silence certain voices and maintain the status quo. Imposing structure is an act of power, but it can be positive if it supports fairer contributions and deeper listening, and disrupts established power dynamics – around gender, age or role for example.

Create an agreement

Setting out some agreements together as a group is important. You might consider confidentiality, encouraging everyone to feel safe to make mistakes or to change their mind, welcoming different perspectives rather than seeking consensus, and respecting boundaries. You can work together to tailor an agreement that meets the needs of everyone in your group and invite – but don't require – people to share personal experiences and insights.

Gently challenge assumptions about power

Thinking differently about power means breaking down the assumptions each of us take for granted, exploring deeper feelings and motivations, and exploring different perspectives. But it will feel very different for different people. You might start simply by thinking of a time that you felt powerful, before digging a bit deeper into the issues.



Think of a time you felt powerful

To start the conversation about power, it's helpful for each of us to question the assumptions we hold. We tend to think of power as something that other people have, but when we take the time to think about it, most of us have experienced feeling powerful. Use this as an opportunity to gently challenge commonly held assumptions about who has power and who hasn't.

1. Think of a time when you felt 'powerful' – whether that was a positive or negative experience. If nothing springs to mind, think about the different forms that power can take, eg power with, power within and power over.
2. If you still can't think of an example from your own life, think of someone powerful you've seen in a film, TV programme or book.
3. Describe the experience in as much detail as you can. What happened? Where were you? Who were you with? How did you feel – before, during and after?
4. What does this experience teach you about power?
5. If you can, compare your experience with someone else's. How were those experiences – the same, or different?

If it feels safe to do so, you can repeat the practice and consider a time when you felt 'powerless' – but think carefully before inviting others to do so.

Use the following techniques – Freefall Writing, Three Ways of Listening and Think, Pair, Share – to help you reflect.



Individual reflection: Freefall Writing

If you're working through the exercises that follow or reflecting on a topic on your own, try Freefall Writing. This is something anyone can do, but it gets easier with practice. You can use it to explore the hidden feelings and motivations around any topic. You'll need a pen and paper, and a timer (a phone will do).

1. Write down the title of the exercise, or the topic you wish to explore, as a heading.
2. Set a timer for, say, three or five minutes and start writing – whatever comes into your head. Even if you don't know what to write, just write that and keep writing.
3. When your time is up, read what you've written. Underline any words or phrases that stand out – look especially for those that hint at deeper feelings or intentions.
4. Choose one word or phrase and write that as the next heading.
5. Set the timer for the same amount of time and write again.
6. Once again, read what you've written and underline what stands out.
7. If you run out of things to write, or want to explore further, choose another underlined word or phrase and write about that!
8. Look back over what you have written. What have you learned?



Working with a partner or small group: Three Ways of Listening

If you're working with a partner or a small group, help each other to reflect more deeply by offering different perspectives. You'll need a timer, and you might like to encourage people to write some notes, either after each round of listening or at the end.

1. Decide on the topic you want to think about. You could do this together, or one person can bring a topic, or you could use the exercises that follow as a prompt.
2. Allocate a timekeeper and decide who will speak first. The first speaker has three to five minutes to respond (adapt timings so everyone has equal time to contribute).
3. If there are two people, while one speaks the other listens for different aspects of the story:
 - the 'head' (ideas, thoughts or facts)
 - the 'heart' (emotions, feelings or values)
 - the 'feet' (intentions or motivations)If there are two or three listeners, decide in advance which aspect of the story each person will listen out for.
4. Listeners don't ask questions or interrupt the speaker. If the speaker runs out of things to say, challenge everyone to sit quietly and wait – this can take practice, but sometimes powerful observations arise after a pause.
5. Listeners take turns to share the different aspects they heard.
6. If you have time, you can then ask questions and have a more open conversation but keep an eye on the time.
7. Swap roles, until everyone has had the chance to speak.



Working with a larger group: Think, Pair, Share¹²

When reflecting on power with a larger group, it can help everyone to participate with more confidence if they have time to think first. You'll need a timer, and everyone will need a pen and paper. You might also like to have a big piece of paper or a digital whiteboard if you're working online.

1. Decide on the topic you want to think about. You could use the exercises that follow as a prompt, allow one person to bring a topic to the table, or collectively set the agenda.
2. Set a timer for, say, three minutes and encourage everyone to write down their thoughts about the topic on their own (you could use Freefall Writing, or just make a few notes).
3. Ask everyone to find a partner or allocate pairs to breakout rooms if you're meeting online. Encourage people to share their thoughts with their partner (you can introduce Three Ways of Listening, or just ask people to share the time equally).
4. Ask each pair to share key points from their discussion with the whole group. You might like to capture these points on a big sheet of paper or digital whiteboard.
5. Allow time for everyone to ask questions and share what they learned from the process.

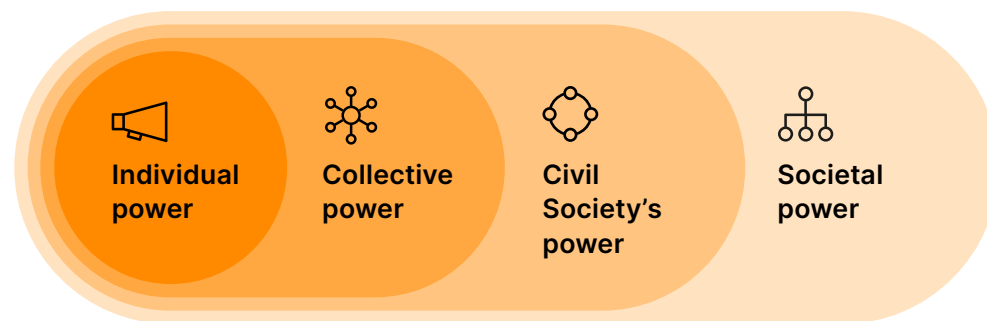
See power more clearly

The Power Lens (on pages 32–33) is a tool for seeing more clearly the way power operates on an individual, collective, civil society and society-wide level. The following activities are to help you reflect on how power is at play in each sphere of the Power Lens in turn.

There's an activity to help you reflect on the power you have as an individual, the way power is at play in obvious and more subtle ways within your organisation or group, the power dynamics between actors in civil society that might affect your work, and the way that societal power influences you.

You can use these activities to reflect on your own or with a group – use the guidelines for creating a safe space and the techniques set out above to help you.

These activities can be adapted to analyse and reflect on power in any social change situation. We invite you to use them to consider how power could be excluding people with first-hand experience of social issues from participating in your work.





Seeing individual power

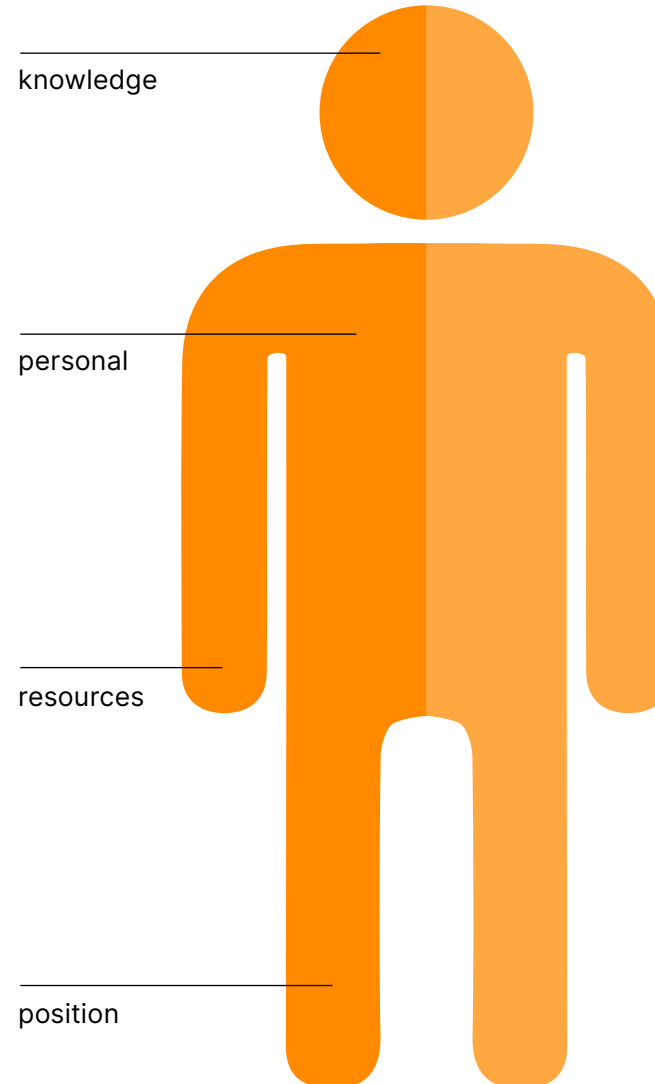
Each of us has some power and some access to sources of power. This activity will help you to see more clearly the different sources of power that are available to you, and those that you might need, in relation to a specific issue or project.

Jot down your thoughts on the image opposite or think more deeply using Freefall Writing. A partner or group might be able to help you spot sources of power that you miss.

1. The left-hand side of the body is for thinking about the power you have.
2. The feet represent your positional power: How does your role in relation to your organisation affect your power?
3. The hands represent your resources: What resources do you have access to and how can you apply them to the issue? Remember resources can be tangible and less tangible – funds, social networks, time or even creativity.
4. The head represents knowledge or information: What do you know, or what information can you access, that is relevant to the issue?
5. The heart represents personal power, 'power within': How powerful do you feel? How have the other sources of power contributed to that?
6. Repeat the process on the right-hand side of the body to think about the power you need: What is missing? Who can help you?

What power do you have?

What power do you need?





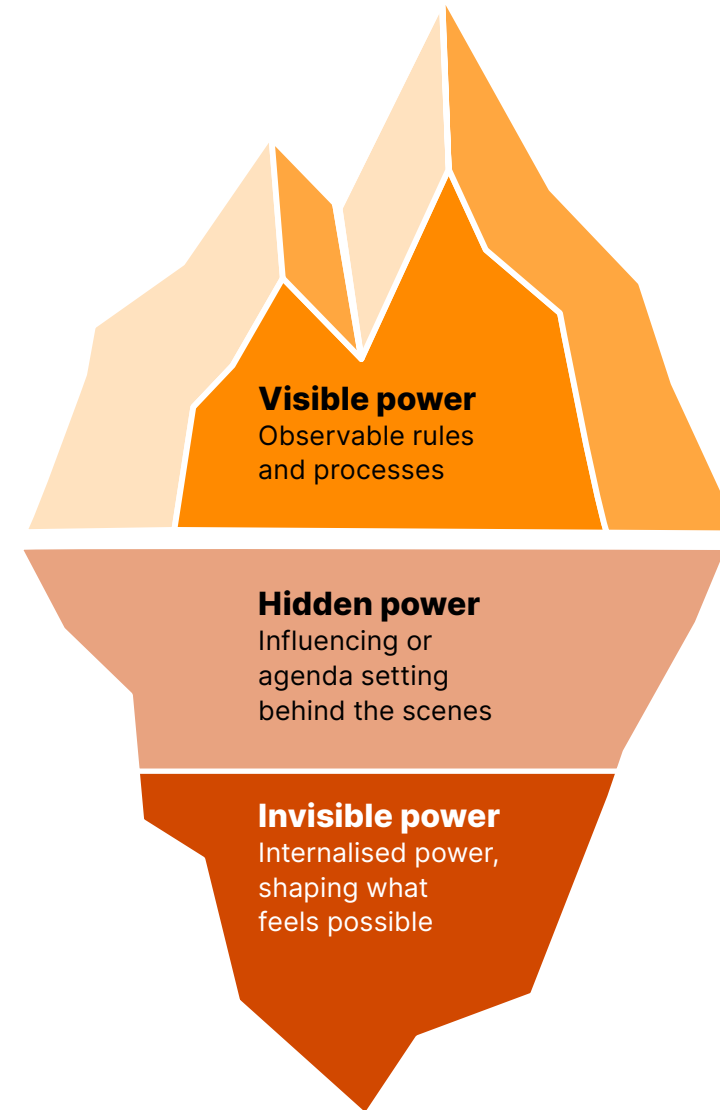
Seeing power in groups and organisations

Power operates in visible, hidden and invisible ways (see page 37 for a discussion on this) to create inequality and exclusion in the social sector. To tackle this, we need to address all these forms of power, but that's tricky if we can't see them.

This activity will help you get under the surface of power in any situation and think through the steps you can take to address it.

Jot down your thoughts on the Power Iceberg or think more deeply using Freefall Writing. If you can, get different perspectives from others to help you see forms of power you might miss.

1. Thinking of power as an iceberg can help draw attention to the way power operates in both obvious and more subtle ways to create inequality and exclusion.
2. Visible power is the observable rules and processes.
3. Hidden power is influencing or agenda setting behind the scenes.
4. Invisible power is internalised, shaping what feels possible.
5. Think about the way that power might be operating in each of these ways in turn.
6. Finally, think about the power you have to create change at each level (you could use the 'seeing individual power' activity to help you). What steps can you take to shift a situation and how might people be able to assume greater power for themselves?





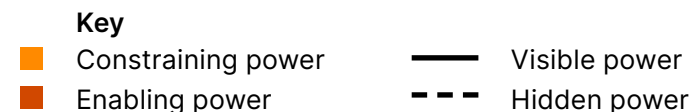
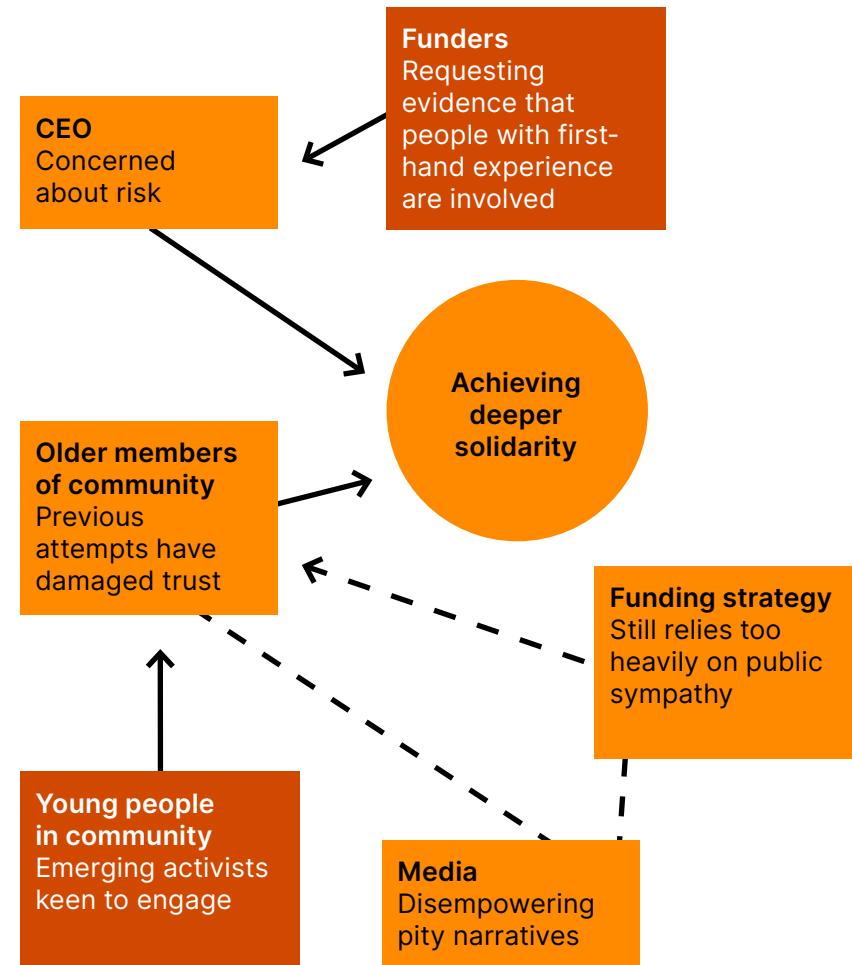
Seeing power in civil society

This is a stakeholder mapping exercise for thinking through the power of different actors in your wider network, and how that influences your capacity to pursue change in partnership with people with first-hand experience.

If you can, bring together people who know different aspects of your organisation to gain a broader perspective. You'll need a big sheet of paper and some small ones (such as sticky notes), ideally different colours, or some coloured pens.

1. Identify the different actors connected to your organisation that influence the way you work – eg individuals (internal and external), partner organisations, funders, or government institutions.
2. Write the name of each actor on a piece of paper. You could use different sizes to show how much power you perceive each to have.
3. Colour-code each sticky to show whether that power is enabling or constraining your work with people with first-hand experience.
4. Draw lines between each actor with an arrow to show the direction of influence. If you like, you can go further and draw solid lines for visible power, dashed lines for hidden power and dotted lines for invisible power.
5. Step back and take a look at your map. What does it tell you? Who or what is enabling or constraining your work?
6. Can you see one action you could take to make a difference?
7. You can also use this activity to explore relationships within your organisation, or to reflect on how power is at play in your social change strategy.

Your power map might look something like this:





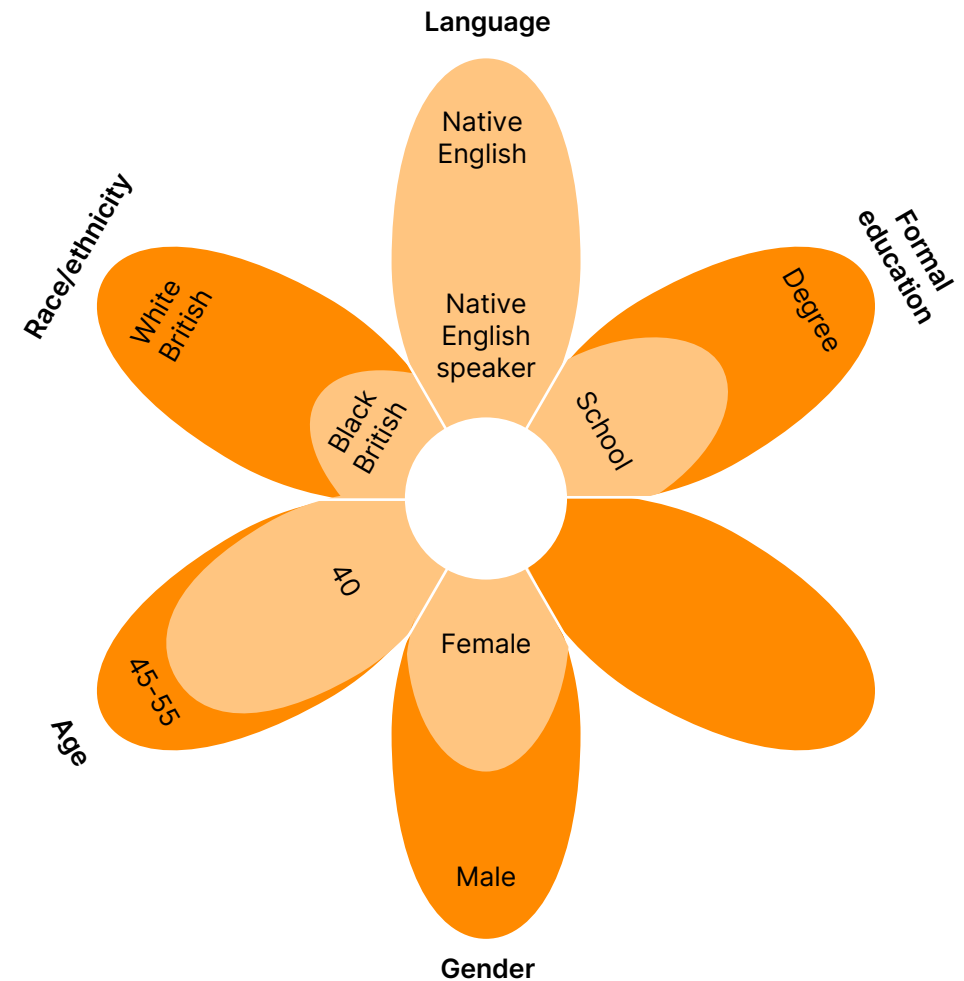
Seeing power in society

Use this activity to reflect on your own identity in relation to the dominant social identities in your organisation or community, or society as a whole. This can reveal how different aspects of social identity intersect in each of us, affording us more privilege and power.

If you use this activity in a group, don't expect people to share their personal flower – focus on what people learn from the process. You can choose whether to write your name in the centre or leave it blank

1. Label each petal with the different identity categories that you feel are most important to the group (eg your organisation or all of society). These might include age, race or ethnicity, gender, class, religion, disability, education, or any other category that feels relevant.
2. In the outer petals, write the dominant characteristic for the people who make up the group you are thinking about.
3. Draw in the inner petals according to how you feel your personal characteristics relate to each category. The larger the inner petal, the closer you feel to the dominant identity in that category.
4. Take a look at your flower. What have you learnt? How does that feel? Were any petals more difficult to fill in, or surprising?
5. If you're with others, it might be interesting to find out whether everyone chose the same categories for their petals, or whether different people experienced different things as important.

Your power flower might look something like this:



Create a strategy to transform power

The Power Framework reveals the different dimensions of power at play in social sector organisations. It shows the need to attend to the hidden and unpredictable dimensions of power (developing consciousness and capabilities, creating inclusive cultures) as much as the tangible (sharing resources and addressing formal rules, policies and governance processes).

The framework can be used to uncover the barriers to, and opportunities for, achieving deeper solidarity, and to map a path to change. We'll talk you through two different ways in which we think the framework can be used.

Firstly, we'll consider how the Power Framework can be a simple tool to help anyone hoping to host a conversation about power to consider how to overcome barriers and create a safe, welcoming space.

Next, we'll describe how the Power Framework can, with buy-in from staff and stakeholders across an organisation, be used to inform and plan a strategy for working more equitably with people with first-hand experience in all areas of your work.

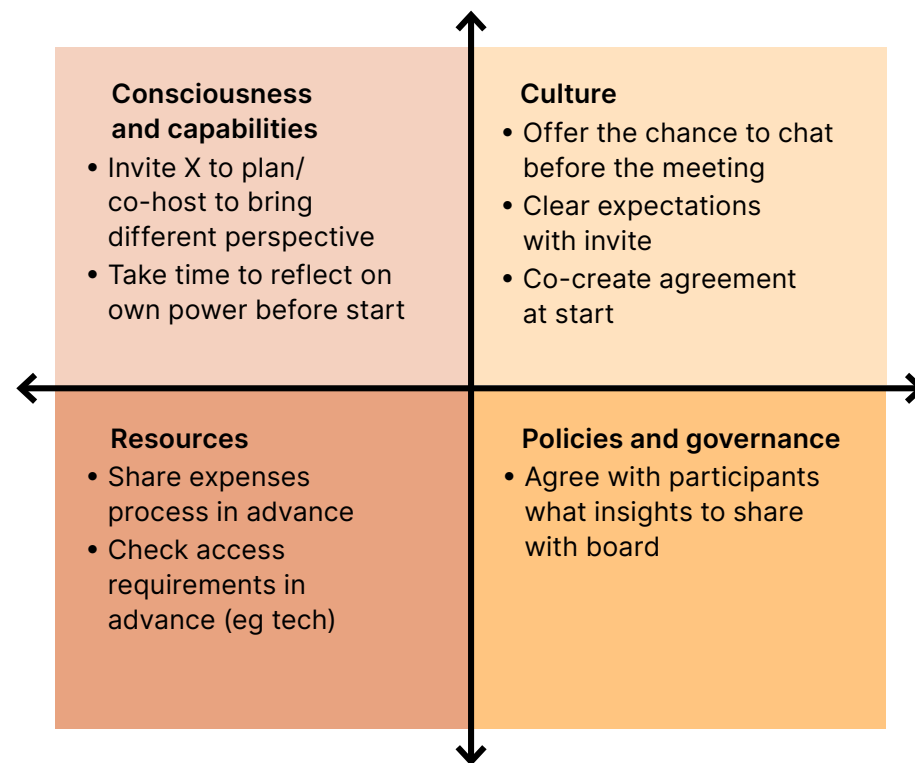
If you don't have that buy-in, the framework can still be useful for individual reflection on how power is at play in your organisation. Use it in conjunction with the other activities set out above, to identify the power you have to contribute to creating a more welcoming organisation.



Using the Power Framework to talk about power

The Power Framework can be used on a day-to-day level to think about how power is operating in each dimension.

For example, if you're planning a conversation about power, you can take a moment to consider each dimension of power in turn. Draw the axes and jot down your thoughts for each quadrant:



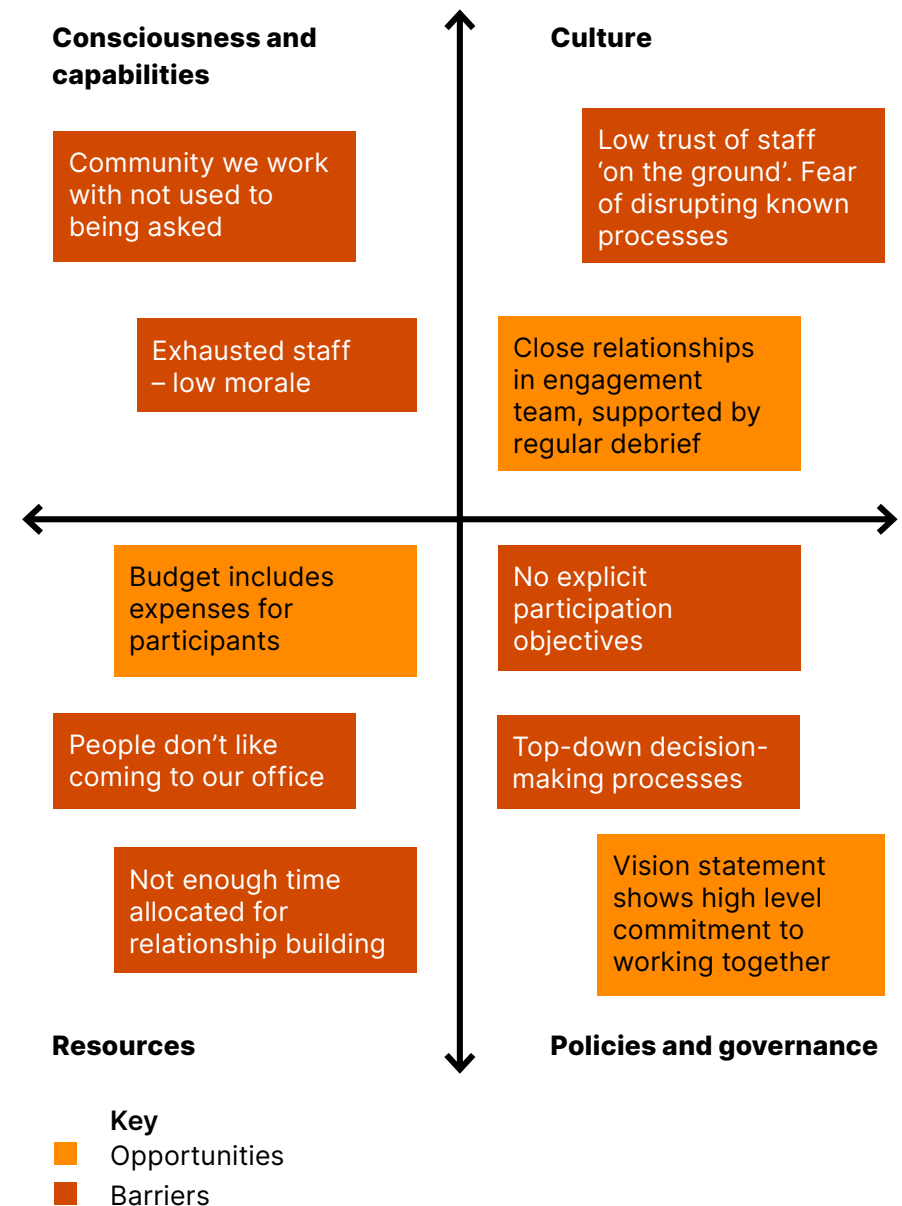


Using the Power Framework to create an organisational strategy

The Power Framework can also be used to map the current reality of how your organisation is working alongside people with first-hand experience and create a strategy for change. If you can, bring together people from different parts of your organisation. You can do this activity in one session, or arrange a series of meetings to look in-depth at each quadrant in turn.

1. Draw the framework on a large sheet of paper.
2. Take time to explore each quadrant of power in turn. Think together about what is getting in the way, and what is going well.
3. Summarise each on a sticky and put it onto the framework according to where it lies in relation to the axes. You could use different coloured stickies for 'barriers' and 'opportunities'.
4. Take a look at your completed framework. What have you learned? Which quadrant have previous activities focused on? What opportunities can you build on? Where are the gaps? How do different things relate? Can you see why previous efforts have been successful or not?
5. Use the completed framework to inform conversations about power in your organisation. You could consider:
 - How does what you've learned affect your vision or theory of change?
 - Which efforts have already been successful and could be built on?
 - How does this inform your priorities, eg in training and spending?

Your Power Framework might look something like this:



Glossary

Some of the words we use mean different things to different people. We tried to allow space for people to explore their own definitions during our inquiry, but we've landed on the following in this guide.

Civil society: All of the individuals and organisations that 'manifest the interest and will of citizens' outside of government and profit-driven business. Includes 'social sector' organisations (see below), faith and community groups, social movements and others. Whenever two or more people organise to effect change in their community or in society, they are part of civil society.

Community: A group of individuals who share a common interest or attribute. This includes, but is not limited to, a shared locality.

First-hand experience: The direct, personal experience of a social issue, or combination of issues. In this guide, when we say 'first-hand experience' we mean 'first-hand experience of poverty and inequality'. Some people we quote use the phrase 'lived experience' to mean the same thing, but others object to the phrase 'lived experience' as they feel it excludes the possibility of them having other types of knowledge and insight.

Inequality: The unequal and unjust balance of power between individuals and/or groups. There are many social inequalities that include, but are not restricted to, the unequal distribution of resources. Inequalities 'intersect' and are experienced by different people in different ways.

Intersectionality: The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class and gender, that create overlapping and interdependent systems of inequality or discrimination.

Participation: The Ladder of Participation¹³ describes levels of influence, with 'citizen control' or people handling all aspects of planning and managing a project at the top. It's a useful model,

but not everyone likes it. In this Guide, we refer to participation as the capacity of a person to be involved to the extent that feels right to them at any given time.

Poverty: There's much debate about how to measure poverty. Arguably, the measurement is less important than the impact on people's lives, so we include the social dimensions as much as the material, including insecurity, and loss of dignity and choice.

Power: We take the purposefully broad view that power is the capacity to create or resist change. A full description of our view of power is on pages 26-27.

Social change: The pursuit of social and environmental change that goes beyond help delivered directly to individuals or places, to the transformation of communities and society. This might be about preventing something as much as driving it.

Social sector: A sub-set of civil society. All of the formally constituted organisations working for social change or social purpose, and not for profit. Includes charities, CICs, formally constituted community organisations, infrastructure and capacity building organisations, funding and philanthropic organisations.

Solidarity: In its simplest terms, solidarity means showing support for another. Seen through the dynamic, intersectional lens of power, solidarity requires a willingness to acknowledge the limits of one's own perspective. We take inspiration from Sara Ahmed's definition, that solidarity 'involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition... that we live on common ground'.¹⁴

Systems: The complex interrelationships between individual behaviour and beliefs, policy decisions, organisations and institutions, public attitudes and culture. Includes social, political and economic systems.

Endnotes and further reading

1. See Baljeet Sandhu (2017) **The Value of Lived Experience in Social Change**.
2. There are some brilliant examples from the UK context as well as further afield. See, for example, Raji Hunjan and Jethro Pettit (2011) **Power: A Practical Guide for Facilitating Social Change** and Julia Unwin DBE (2018) **Civil Society Futures**.
3. These expressions of power were first set out by Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller (2002) in **A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation**. 'Power for' was added later.
4. For an interesting feminist perspective on empowerment, see Cecilia Sardenberg (2008) **Liberal vs Liberating Empowerment: A Latin American Feminist Perspective on Conceptualising Women's Empowerment**.
5. These forms of power are one face of the **Powercube** developed by John Gaventa (2006).
6. See **Charity so White**.
7. The Power Framework is adapted from the **Gender at Work Framework**, developed by Aruna Rao and Srilatha Batliwala (2012).
8. Anthea Lawson (2021) describes her own experience and reflections of this in her book **The Entangled Activist: Learning to recognise the master's tools**, Perspectiva Press.
9. The **Centre for Knowledge Equity** is informative here.
10. **Power and Integrity** are using power analysis to inform governance and organisational integrity.
11. Spaces of power are a second face of the **Powercube**, drawing on work by Andrea Cornwall and others.
12. Adapted from an activity in a British Council (2018) guide **Active Citizens Facilitators Toolkit: Globally connected, locally engaged**.
- 13 **The Ladder of Participation** was devised by Sherry Arnstein (1969).
- 14 Sara Ahmed (2014) **The Cultural Politics of Emotion**.
- 15 See the **Better Way Network**.

For further reading please see the resources on our Pinboard at www.smk.org.uk.

“Talking about power seems simple, but actually it’s radical. It gets to the roots, shakes the foundations of the charity sector.”

The Foundry
17 Oval Way
London SE11 5RR

020 3752 5644
info@smk.org.uk

Follow us



smkcampaigners



SheilaMcKechnieFoundation



@SMKCampaigners

England and Wales Charity No.1108210
Scotland Charity No.SC044207