



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

Case Study Summary



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

(Caroline Slocock, network co-convenor)

A Better Way (ABW) brings together a broad spectrum of leaders from national level to grassroots, and from different sectors, to learn from, invigorate and be inspired by each other. Its primary aim is to improve services, build strong communities and create a fairer society: developing a network of thinkers and practitioners was identified as an approach to deliver this broad remit.

This is a summary of a more in-depth case study of ABW, written by Ilona Haslewood. It forms part of a broader exploration of the evidence on developing and supporting networks, which was conducted by Ilona Haslewood on behalf of the Carnegie UK Trust. The key points from this review are summarised in the 'networks explainer' on page 3.

Origins

In 2012-13, a group of civil society leaders (including Caroline Slocock and Steve Wyler, who subsequently became the co-convenors of ABW) began talking about the need to tell a more hopeful story of social change. They built on the concept of 'the common good': a public policy approach rooted in human relationships and a sense of shared citizenship. These ideas were crystallised in a paper published by CUKT, *A Call to Action for the Common Good*, and further refined in a series of meetings in 2015. The next step was to translate the Call to Action into reality.

Why a network?

Making existing examples of 'the common good' visible meant creating a space for those who were already trying to make things better to exchange ideas and build relationships. These people existed in a variety of places, sectors and organisations, and so it was clear that a hierarchical organisation or project would not be the right approach. Just as importantly, the sheer size and breadth of the purpose, and the timescale needed to achieve it, meant that a format that supports widespread engagement around a shared vision would be more likely to succeed.



Networks are well-suited for relationship-based engagement, as well as mutual learning and inspiration. A 'founding group' of key people agreed that the best way forward would be to bring together leaders from a diverse spectrum of sectors and political views, who were linked through their shared commitment to change and a belief in the 'eight principles' of ABW.

Building & shaping the network

After the launch of ABW in 2016, the co-convenors made a conscious decision to focus on building trusted relationships among new and founding members, and on providing shared space for small groups to exchange experiences and reflections. This meant allowing the network to grow slowly and organically at first, often using personal contacts to bring in different views and experiences.



The first groups met in London, but others were gradually established across England. After the first year, members noticed that the discussions had begun to influence members' own work, which inspired a collection of *Insights for A Better Way* (2018). After another year of gradual expansion, which saw membership rise to around 400, ABW recorded another milestone publication, bringing together the knowledge and expertise from this broader base in the publication of *A Call to Action for a Better Way* (2019). The document set out a clear focus on how ABW would seek to bring about change, based on four key themes: sharing power, changing practices, collaborative leadership, and changing organisations.

Network activities

Before 2020, ABW's model was based on bringing people together face-to-face. The network encouraged the formation of 'local cells': small groups of up to 10 people who gathered informally around a shared geography or area of interest. Alongside this, 'national cells' brought together larger groups focusing on each of the four themes in *A Call to Action*; and a series of roundtables invited guest speakers to discuss particular topics in greater depth.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the network to adapt by moving meetings online. The network continued to convene 'national cells' regularly and, together with a series of roundtables and a national gathering, met online over 30 times. For a network of people spread across England, this shift brought benefits in terms of accessibility and inclusivity: people who previously would not have been able to afford time to travel to meetings were now more able to attend and participate in the network's activities.



There remain questions about the extent to which the approach of fostering relationships and in-depth reflection is viable in an online environment (members particularly missed the informal interactions in the margins of meetings). However, the overall experience was positive, as evidenced by sustained engagement over the year, a growing membership (now over 680), and shared agreement that in the future ABW will revert to some face-to-face meetings but continue to meet mostly online.

Networks explainer: what they are and when to use them

The literature on networks highlights a number of key characteristics which help to decide when it is right to use a network approach rather than another change mechanism:

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

* This Networks explainer is adapted from Ilona Haslewood's (2021) *A review of the evidence on developing and supporting policy and practice networks.*



Leadership & structure

The network began in 2016 with two national co-convenors and a small founding group, with local and national cells starting up depending on local membership and topics of interest. This form of distributed leadership and light, informal structure remains, in essence, to this day, with the addition of a third convenor whose focus is on the North of England.



In this way, ABW offers a real-life example that network leadership is significantly different from leadership of other organisations and project management, where command and control play a bigger role. Members reflected on the co-convenors' low-key, modest style of leadership, which struck the right balance between not dominating and not editing themselves out completely.

The network's functions are supported by Civil Exchange, which hosts the network, and by CUKT, which provides practical support (in addition to core funding). But the network itself remains distinct from these supporting entities, drawing on the collective knowledge of its membership.

Value of membership

There are no formal qualifying criteria for joining ABW, beyond interest in the eight principles. The co-convenors recognise (and are striving to address) the fact that certain sectors, backgrounds and political views are more represented than others. But the overall result of the network's openness is a uniquely broad range of leaders – “a diversity of organisations, sectors and thinking”.



Opportunities for peer learning and exposure to new ideas and practices are regularly cited as core benefits of being part of ABW, as well as the ability to form valuable relationships. More broadly, people spoke about the validation and reassurance they gain from having a “fellowship” of like-minded people drawn to a similar set of values who want to engage with and learn from each other – reflections that suggest the network form has supported ABW members to work towards common goals through their own organisations and activities.

Effecting change

Networks are known to be harder to evaluate than projects or organisations: they tend to be more organic and relationships-based, they work on longer timescales, and their influence can be harder to attribute. However, the co-convenors saw routes to effecting change through the network on a number of levels..

- **At ground level:** One of the most fundamental ways of influencing change is through members' own work. This can take the form of members applying ABW principles in practice, such as at Shelter. It has also led to members forming their own local initiatives, for example the Time for Kids movement in Surrey.
- **Through initiatives with national influence, led by ABW members, inspired and supported by ABW:** The network has influenced, supported and connected a range of initiatives, including The Relationships Project, Good help, bad help and the Power Sharing Project.
- **Via other networks:** Through its members, ABW has collaborated with other organisations, helping to align thinking and enrich each other's work. Examples include

running a joint national conference with Community Organisers, and providing input on the Local Area Coordination Network's leadership course.

- **Via inputs into national policy initiatives:** This is often achieved through individual leaders and members, but sometimes as a result of ABW putting forward its ideas as a network. Its influence can be seen in the 2018 Civil Society Strategy (led by Danny Kruger MP, a founding member of ABW) and in the 2020 Levelling up our communities report which picked up some of the suggestions put forward by ABW.

Funders, funding & practical support

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

Over the past five years, a small group of funders (including Carnegie UK Trust, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and John Ellerman Foundation) have covered the network's operating costs of around £60,000 per year; and more recently Power to Change has become an additional funder of ABW. This funding covers some of the co-convenors' time, but they note that they are getting busier and busier as the network grows. At this point the funding and practical support arrangements align with the network's profile, size and activities, but this is under review. Whilst there are benefits to a 'low-maintenance' model, operating on a shoestring may not prove sustainable, and the co-convenors are aware that a lot more could be achieved if resources allowed greater distribution of tasks.



Looking to the future

At the end of 2020, still in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, the network brought together learning from the past year in *Time for a change: A rallying call for a better way*. This publication built on the values at the core of ABW, making the case for change in a way that was simple, urgent and "quietly powerful". It invites ABW members and others to unite around four themes – putting relationships first, sharing and building power, listening to each other, joining forces – and to "travel with others hopefully" in order to deliver a fairer society.



ABW intends to work towards this vision for at least the next two years, and there is support for this from its growing membership. Yet an uncertainty remains about how much a network can achieve in the face of the urgent, entrenched and systemic problems ahead. Even if it retains its network form, *Time for a change* predicted that individual efforts to put ABW principles into practice will not be enough for fundamental change. This points towards more coordinated action, which may mean a larger and more firmly defined support structure and more time spent on influencing decision makers – a shift that could also mean that fewer resources go into relationship building between network members.

Networks have their own life-cycles. ABW is now a well-developed network that has grown organically, keeping relationships at its centre. It has changed as its own development and external circumstances have prompted it to, and it may need to change further as it continues to serve its membership and promote their shared vision.