# A world of good relationships

A report on the work of the Relationship Project, our learning so far and our plans for the future

**RELATIONSHIPS** PROJECT

@R\_shipsProject relationshipsproject.org

2021

# MAKING COMMON SENSE, COMMON PRACTICE.

ow are we to respond to the long tail challenges of Covid and to the injustices that it exposed? How to heal divided communities, to respect difference, trade fairly, care for the displaced, or share the natural world? How are we to live together?

More than ever, the big questions in 2021 are all about relationships. Their substance and character will determine the direction and quality of our lives.

This is as true for the local and the personal as it is for the global. I have been a community worker in east London for more than forty years. Unpeeling very different problems has repeatedly revealed relationships either broken or never existing to a meaningful degree and, equally frequently, endeavouring to repair relationships or build new ones has been a big part of the answer.

Wider society, meanwhile, has been moving in the wrong direction: we network and transact as never before but being well connected is not the same as connecting well. Meaningful time together has been systematically displaced by fast and shallow connection.

We value competition, individualism, speed and scale rather than effective relationships, collaboration and the common good. Our organisations have become more remote and less human as these attitudes are wired into every aspect of our lives.

We can do better. Covid and lockdown has shown us all that our health and happiness, as individuals and as communities, is built from the aggregation of our personal relationships.

We could build a better society, an equitable economy, effective government, flourishing businesses, successful services, happy, healthy, thriving communities if we put relationships first.

In our work on the Relationships Observatory over the last 18 months we have seen how attitudes and behaviours have become more trusting and collaborative, kinder and more emotionally responsive. By now applying these positives to address the negatives from the Covid year we can essay a version of the future that is fair and humane and rooted in strong relationships.

For me, The Relationships Project bottles much of what I have experienced in the communities of east London and beyond, but it is far more than that. Combining creativity and collective experience, we set out a plan in this Prospectus that takes us through the months of reflection and recuperation post Covid, into a period of renewal and new building and on towards a vision for a generation.

I am not interested in pretty ideas that have no practical application. We all need, and gain strength from, one another.

Strong relationships are not a frilly accessory in a happy neighbourhood, a thriving school, an effective health service, a flourishing business, or a successful and cohesive society.

They are the making of it all. Working towards a world of good relationships, wherever we are and whatever we do, is simple common sense. We want to make it common practice.

Carl Robuson

David Robinson

# OUR LONG TERM VISION

magine a place where good relationships are the central operating principle, the starting point for all decisions, the mechanism by which change is realised, the outcome we all strive towards. Think of your place, an organisation perhaps, a neighbourhood, a school, a council: what would change?

> The doctor sits on the bed, takes my elderly father's hand between her own, looks him in the eye and says, "good morning Dennis." He looks up, listens, smiles. Most of all he takes notice, he cooperates in his own care.

Not an hour later a nurse appears, lifts his arm and begins to take his blood pressure. Not a word. "I'm not dead yet," he says without moving. He refuses lunch.

The patient / provider relationship has a significant effect on the extent to which the patient cooperates in their own care and a major influence on the outcome.

Councils that systematically apply a social plumbing test in their planning guidelines for every development...

Community facilities that

build social connection

throughout our lives not

just in times of need...

Sustaining good relationships as common practice, with public services that are humanized, not customized...

Imagine...

Supermarkets and coffee chains that welcome and connect the isolated customers... Patients at the GP practice can book an appointment through a simple console on the wall. Some still queue to talk to the receptionist. They all have a similar explanation: "I like a little chat with Maureen."

The Practice Manager wants all patients directed to the technology but some people who have the "little chat" are happily reassured and don't need to speak to the GP.

Suppose the practice set up a daily coffee morning, managed by a community worker. Over time she could be facilitating the "little chat" between a dozen patients or more.

Relationships formed here would be more likely to lead to real reciprocal friendships than the encounter with the GP, precious GP time would be released for patients that need it most, and results would improve because we know that the quality of our relationships has a significant impact on our mental and physical health.



Two elderly people were living independently when the flu bug struck. Both stopped eating and forgot their regular medication.

For the first this began a spiral of decline. She has now moved permanently into a nursing home at taxpayer's expense.

The second had been in an allotment group for many years. When he fell sick other members cooked meals, ran errands, checked daily. Now he's back digging onions. No one in that friendship circle calls themselves a carer. They say that they "did what anyone would do".

Such trusting relationships can't be formed quickly. Reducing expenditure and providing better support for one another requires the design of facilities and systems which build relationships throughout our lives. This is smart management of scarce resources. It saves money and improves lives.

Local events that go beyond the transitory and make enduring connections...

And ultimately, across the UK, an approach to public policy and discourse that doesn't pitch us against one another but brings us together.

# WE THINK:

Good relationships are valuable as both an end in themslves, and as a means to other ends. Relationships themselves provide companionship, support, joy, love, hope, inspiration. They also lead to better health, lower crime, higher educational outcomes, stronger communities.

ACUTE LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

### TACKLING DEFICITS

- The chemistry of social change begins with small acts and distributed players. Place-by-place activity generates well informed, deep rooted, sustainable progress.
- However, such radical incrementalism is not always sufficient. Some systemic obstacles can only be addressed on a bigger canvas. Societal change takes off when we start to see the local action within a framework that enables and supports.

This is why we are working in a range of dimensions from the hyper local Active Neighbours programme through to the work with local government and on to the wide open field building activity. It is a path to scale that doesn't build an empire or rely on rigid replication but one that engages with practical experience, liberates our biggest assets and involves us all.

OTHER SOCIAL BENEFITS EG. HEALTH, EDUCATION

### GENERATING ASSETS

# OUR JOURNEY SO FAR

We began in 2018 with a public lecture at LSE, 'How relationships shape the world and where to go with what we know'. A conversation began, a core group developed and in January 2019 The Relationships Project emerged.

From the early stages, we were committed to the three pillars which underpin our long-term aims:

- Building a body of knowledge, stories and experiential evidence to answer the starter question: "What works?"
- <u>Co-creating tools</u> and <u>training</u> to help to answer the practical question: "What can we do here?" This is the beating heart of The Relationships Project, codifying what we can, working on the ground to help design and redesign organizations, systems and services with good relationships as the central principle.
- **Igniting connections** to answer the scaling question: "How do we spread and embed these ideas?"





n the early stages, we started to research and publish a bank of extended Case Studies teasing out the insights from successful relationship-centred work across the sectors.

Organisations and services that are built on strong relationships are not all the same, not least because every relationship is different. There is no single beacon to direct us all but lots of lanterns that can light our individual paths. Some of the Case Studies are also now available as Case Study Cards - shorter versions for use in training and we are adding continuously to both sets of materials.

From the distillation of this work we developed the Relationships Makers Guide and, in advance of the Mayoral elections, we co-created work on a '<u>Relationship-Centred City</u>', publishing our first major report in January 2020.

Two months later, just before lockdown, we established the <u>Relationships Observatory</u>. Whilst none of us knew exactly what to expect at that time, it was already evident that our social behaviour was about to change.

The Observatory is a simple mechanism for gathering insights and working to spot, support, embed and sustain the positives. All the Observations are drawn from volunteer "Observers" across the UK (and, as it turned out, some from further afield).

With open Zoom conversations and frequent postings, the Observatory was designed to learn and report in real time.

# **1. BUILDING A BODY OF KNOWLEDGE**

We thought this immediacy was important. If we waited and looked back, retrospective coherence would reinterpret the journey and experience would be lost.

In July 2020, we published The Moment We Noticed - our report on the first 100 days of the Observatory and followed up with Turning to the Light six months later. In both reports we particularly considered shifts in attitudes and social behaviour. We set out a series of invitations for working together on a relationship-centred renewal and launched new tools for helping with this work.

In summer 2021, based on this work, we introduced The Lookout - a complimentary project for children and young people to share their experiences of the pandemic and hopes for the future.

[The Moment We Noticed is] one of the 66 most insightful, thoughtful, inspiring analyses to come out of this terrible time. Humble in tone, profoundly important in content."

– Dame Julia Unwin

66 Unlike almost every other report I see, I recognise this, I understand what is being said as important, it chimes with my concerns, and it is actually useful to me in planning practice."

- Jane Williams, Founder CEO of the Magpie Project



# 2. DEVELOPING AND **DELIVERING TOOLS** AND TRAINING

Our continually evolving <u>Toolbox</u> is co-designed to put relationships at the heart of what we do in different places and contexts. These practical resources now include...

# The Relationships Heatmap

Wherever we are and whatever our place - whether our classroom, our business, our team or our local community setting - we can all take action to help nurture good relationships. The Heatmap is an interactive diagnostic tool which guides reflection on different elements of practice, unearthing areas of strength and areas where more can be done to nurture relationships. The visualised results can then be shared and compared with others and used to identify practical steps for change.

We become the story that we tell ourselves. If we tell ourselves that we

weaving them together and learning from the experience.

were divided and diminished by the pandemic we will emerge divided and

diminished. Many organisations and individuals have a different and far better

story to tell. The Storybook is a simple tool for understanding our own stories,





# Training

Using these tools and others we offer training to individuals and organisations looking for inspiration and practical support. Ranging from one off 90-minute workshops through to multi week programmes, our training brings together supportive cohorts in a peer learning environment. We've enjoyed partnering with a number of organisations to date, including Power to Change, Barking and Dagenham council, Catalyst, Grapevine, NPC, Coalition for Efficiency, Good Business, Enrol Yourself, Carnegie Trust, Action Together and the Dola Bamgboye Foundation.

# The Bridge Builders Handbook

The Spirit of Lockdown Storybook

Over the last year, thousands of connections have been made close to home, but wider, cross community relationships have suffered from social distancing. Tensions and suspicions have run wild. We have been working with Professor Neil Denton, a leading practitioner in conflict transformation to apply the positives from the mutual aid experience and help local connectors connect with other communities and "think like mediators". The Handbook translates expert knowledge into practical steps and is designed both for use on its own and as a basis for guided learning.

# relationshipsproject.org

## The Active Neighbours Field Guide

9m active neighbours cared for others outside the family in 2020. Our research shows that almost 70% want to carry on caring when the pandemic is over, but these people are not an army waiting to be redeployed. Trying to catch and preserve the spirit of the 9m with systems and structures is like trying to catch a butterfly in a jam jar - we will kill or damage that which makes it special. Our collaboratively created Field Guide is designed to help those who work with the time givers, formally or informally, to understand them better, their motives and their needs, and to support them appropriately and effectively as their roles evolve.

# Kit for Councils

Communities, towns and cities, are an aggregation of personal relationships. Local authorities have an important part to play in nurturing and sustaining a regenerative ecology which actively supports solidarity and practical kindness without squashing the butterfly. Working with council director Tony Clements and others, we produced our Kit for Councils to help local authorities sustain and enhance their community relationships and to reimagine their organisations and services with relationships as the central principle.



# **3. CATALYSING COLLECTIVE ACTION**

e can do worthwhile things ourselves but sometimes it is only by coming together with people who have different skills, experiences and perspectives and cultivating a common field that we really break new ground.

We think there are opportunities to learn from one another in the field of relationships, develop a shared narrative and influence the long term trajectory of policy and practise across the sectors with a more collaborative approach.

We gathered a small informal group of First Movers in 2019 and Iona Lawrence began to lead a conversation with hundreds of community organisers, academics, policy advisers, local authority people, funders and business leaders.

66 Our shared and uniting goal is to build a world that is designed for and around relationships: a world where relationships are the first mile, not the extra one."

- Iona Lawrence

66 In the past decade we've been missing the infrastructure that's needed to make the most powerful and transformative ideas stick. We need to reimagine infrastructure. Sharing and spreading needs to be key. [It needs to] support and encourage experimentation. All this stuff doesn't need big organisations or large scale infrastructure."

- Contributor to Through Thick and Thin

Her report '<u>Through Thick and Thin</u>' was published in March 2021 and concluded:

"There are many bright spots of energy around relationships and relationship-centred practice but they are disconnected, fragmented and unevenly spread. To make meaningful progress towards large-scale change we need to connect up these sub-communities and build our collective ability to bring other people with us... a conventional organising model wouldn't reflect the diversity and dynamism of the field and realise the potential for cross pollination. Instead we need, and are now building, a methodology that exemplifies the culture of the field: relational, open, generous and effective; approaching its work with an experimental mindset: testing what works and giving everything time to bed in or fail."

We are calling this collaboration the Relationships Collective.

66



# WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

In March 2020, just before lockdown we established the Relationships Observatory. None of us knew exactly what to expect but it was already evident that our social behaviour was about to change. The Observatory was a simple mechanism for gathering insights from volunteer Observers and for working together on spotting, supporting and embedding the positives.

Through swift evolution, we discovered a lot about how to build reciprocal, trusting, learning relationships. Listening deeply takes time but is itself an exercise in relationship building and ultimately an enabling process, not an extractive one. The Relationships Project is not an academic research institute. We learn from doing with others and the more openly we do it, the better we become.



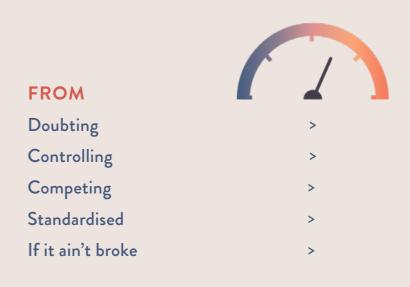
# ABOUT SHIFTS IN SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

We observed five big shifts in attitudes and behaviours. These undercurrents characterised the immediate responses to Covid and lockdown, and could prefigure profound and positive change in the longer term.

ew activities and behaviours were principle led rather than rules based, cemented by solidarity rather than compliance, less hierarchical, more horizontal, less defensive, more can-do, kinder, more emotionally responsive and driven from the ground up.

Social capital surveys undertaken in the aftermath of disasters across the world identify comparable shifts from "me to we", then back again about six months later. Some new behaviours here will drift back, but we won't unknow our neighbours, lose new skills or instantly forget the glimpses we have had of different ways of living.

# WE WITNESSED A SHIFT...



relationshipsproject.org

There are opportunities now for societal progress but the season is finite and the clock is ticking.

66 She said it's a good time for people who are always lonely. She hasn't been able to get to the synagogue for a long time but now people have helped her sort out her phone and join some prayers and other groups online, and they're bringing her home cooked food. She's loving it!"

- Observatory Contributor

## TO

Trusting Enabling Cooperating Personalised What if?



# **ABOUT COMMUNITY** CONNECTION

Mutual Aid and broader community support activity were the most obvious manifestation of these undercurrents.

ur research, undertaken with YouGov in autumn 2020, showed that almost 9m people were caring for others for more than three hours a week, that 6.29m intended to do the same or more afterwards and that 3.94m had done little or no volunteering before the pandemic.

When we factor in all those who were unavailable because they were fully engaged as key workers or because they were shielding (particularly the older age groups who are usually most likely to volunteer) these figures look even more remarkable.

The vision of a community as a nexus of strong, mutually supportive relationships has often been dismissed in public policy circles as more nostalgic than progressive. Recent experience has proved the timeless relevance, and the extraordinary potential, of cohesive, caring communities.



# **ABOUT BONDING** AND BRIDGING

Whilst we have become closer to our immediate neighbours, it is also true that we have become more critical of people who we see as different.

ivisions have expanded, hate crime has gone up and culture wars have erupted, locally and nationally. The fault lines are familiar ones, particularly around ethnicity and income. A mixture of fear and kindness, enforced isolation and intense bubbles, shrunken horizons and new experiences has all turned us inwards, bonding stronger with some, whilst disconnecting with others.

Two months before the first lockdown, the Prime Minister was talking about "bringing the country back together" after the polarising battles of Brexit. If repairing and rebuilding relationships across the UK was a priority in January 2020, it is even more important today.



# **ABOUT THIS MOMENT**

Relationships between citizens, rather than between citizens and the market or state, has increased in importance rapidly but not suddenly. This is a pivotal moment in a long term trend.

e were suggesting before the pandemic that the relationship between the citizen and the state defined the economic and political orthodoxy in the immediate postwar era. It was overtaken in later decades by the relationship between the citizen and the market but latterly this era too has run its course. Using different language, many academics and practitioners in different fields agree.

These trends were widely discussed pre-Covid but the pace of change has quickened over the last year. Community Connectors reached out with messages about shielding and vaccines, teachers, council staff and small businesses reinvented what they do to meet individual needs, care workers adapted activity to sustain personal connection and neighbours supported one another. Relationships between citizens were repeatedly proven to be the common sense approach.

Now we are at first base in a three hump crisis - first the pandemic, merging into the recession and then a further wave of social consequences. Most councils are planning cuts for at least the next 4 years. And all this after a decade that was rocked first by the banking crisis and deep reaching austerity, then Brexit.

- Continuing change in the public realm in the 2020s is given. The choice is between reverting to old orthodoxies for an erosion of the public realm or a strategic, principle based refounding.
- The joy of a relationship-centred view is that we don't have to wait for a grand, government led plan to set a new course. We can start now, here, on our own patch, and the practical experience can be distilled and used to support change in other places. Social change isn't about waiting for the stars to align. It is about navigating the uncertainty by the light we have.
- The outlook we envisage for the Relationships Project isn't defined by Covid, but it does begin with its legacy. In the next phase we will be working with the upside from the Covid experience, place by place, helping to develop the wider framework for a societal shift towards a world of good relationships.

We need to ask ourselves how much of the 66 old normal was deeply damaging and must be stopped and how much was simply unnecessary and could be replaced by something better. And how much was crucial but criminally undervalued."

- Observatory contributor

# OUR PLAN FOR THE NEXT TWO YEARS

# 1. TO BUILD THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

## **TO SUSTAIN AND EVOLVE THE OBSERVATORY, EVER OPEN FOR**

Topics will change but this open, rapid, collaborative process will sit at the centre of our work

We will continue to convene interested groups to explore relevant and timely topics, learning in real time from experiential as well as academic insights. We've been pleased with how the Observatory network has grown and diversified over the past 18 months and seek to continue on this trajectory. We will continue to invite and support members to co-facilitate sessions around topics of interest to them, and will continue to share the learning widely and openly.

## **TO COMPLEMENT EXISTING ACADEMIC LITERATURE WITH**

Working with those 'on the ground' who are experimenting with relationship-centred approaches

There are many 'bright spots' of energy in different sectors and areas of expertise. In partnering with those such as Neil Denton on the Bridge Building work and Tony Clements on the Kit for Councils, both leading the way in developing relational practice in their area, we are able to develop resources and learning. Going forwards, we will continue to work in partnership with experts, whether qualified by training and practice or by lived experience.

## **TO CONTINUE TO BUILD A USEFUL AND USABLE REPOSITORY OF**

### Developing the bank of case studies to guide and inspire

LISTENING AND TALKING

**PRACTITIONER LEARNING** 

**GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES** 

to capture and distil learning

We'll continue to expand the bank of case studies showcasing interesting and effective ways of putting relationships front and centre, and experiment with ways of making these accessible, useable and useful. So far, we have created long-form case studies, case study cards, and an interactive database. Over the next two years we'll learn about which of these options work for different groups and how they can be expanded and improved.



# 2. TO DEVELOP **AND DELIVER TOOLS AND** TRAINING

### TO ESTABLISH AN EVOLVING, VARIED AND POPULAR **TRAINING PROGRAMME**

Short and long form, with income generating potential from some programmes

Building on the success of the Relationship Makers programme delivered in partnership with Power to Change, the Introduction to Relationship-Centred Design delivered as part of Beyond, and our bespoke Relationship Heatmap training, we plan to expand delivery of our training programme to new cohorts. We also have plans to develop a train the trainer programme to equip more people to deliver our training and spread the word about relationship-centred working.

### TO DEVELOP A PEER LEARNING PROGRAMME FOR SUSTAINING THE **POSITIVES FROM THE PANDEMIC**

Supporting Community Weavers to embed the gains and sustain the energy in their communities

There is an opportunity to focus on applying the positives from the last 18 months to addressing some of the challenges within communities, both new and pre-existing. Our research suggests that 'Community Weavers' (the connectors and organisers who have led the local community responses) are well-placed to lead these efforts, and have the energy and passion to do so. We are developing a peer support package which brings together the resources and learning developed from our Active Neighbours and Bridge Building work with peer support techniques to help communities across the UK to sustain the positive changes beyond the short-term window.

### TO ESTABLISH A LOCAL GOVERNMENT PEER LEARNING NETWORK **AROUND THE RELATIONSHIPS FRAMEWORK**

Working with councils on developing a local ecology that supports thriving relationships

Our Kit for Councils has received a positive response from local authorities, many of whom have reached out to learn more. Drawing on the resources within the Kit and our learning from supporting councils to use it, we plan to establish a peer learning network for local authorities interested in becoming more relational. The network will enable participants to share ideas and good practice, learn from one another, and test practical ways of putting relationships front and centre.



## TO ESTABLISH A SERVANT-LEADER GROUP TO DRIVE FORWARD **COLLECTIVE ACTION**

Creating the infrastructure for a paradigm shift towards relationships

Working with Iona Lawrence, we'll convene a 'Relationships Collective' - a gathering of organisations representative of the diversity of the field of relationships across perspectives, sectors, communities, identities and geographies. The Collective will be a 'servant-leader' group, focused on convening, plugging gaps, generous activity and practical action.

### TO RUN A PROGRAMME OF EXPERIMENTS FOR CONNECTING MEMBERS **OF THE NASCENT 'FIELD'**

Creating spaces for practitioners, policymakers, academics and more to share ideas, approaches and challenges around relationship-centred practice

We plan to deliver breakthrough experiments that The Collective identify to meet the needs of the field and have the potential to unlock societal progress towards a relationship-centred world. Examples of this include: a collaborative initiative to shape relational philanthropy practice; and peer-to-peer learning group focused on how best to measure the impact of relationship-centred approaches.

### TO DEVELOP COLLECTIVE RESOURCES - INCLUDING MAPS AND HANDBOOKS - TO HELP MEMBERS NAVIGATE THE FIELD

Making it easier for individuals and organisations to see where they fit in the wider field and spot opportunities for collaboration

Working with others in the 'field of relationships' and working in the open, we'll develop: i) a comprehensive network map of the field of relationships, populated publicly, helping people see where they fit in the landscape, identify fellow travellers and possible collaborators, and ii) a set of open and evolving handbooks which help users navigate the evidence base around relationship-centred practice, and find practical resources to strengthen their work.

We'll also identify and help develop other collective resources identified by members of the field as being useful and important in helping to develop relational practice.

# **3. TO CATALYSE** COLLECTIVE **ACTION**

# **SECURING** THE NEXT **STAGE**

# OVER THE NEXT TWO YEARS WE INTEND:



To develop and consolidate a small group of "Anchors" - supporters who are willing to back our mission with a medium term commitment to the core budget.

# **OUR BUSINESS MODEL**

Our work requires collaboration, not all conquering budgets. We need to consolidate the core income to plan reliably. We are committed to keeping this below £200k for the next two years.

Specific programmes, like Bridge Builders and Active Neighbours, are developed and delivered with partners and, where funding is needed, separately funded. We think that this modular business structure is appropriate to the times. It reflects the spirit of the Project and our best role in the sector; it enables us to be nimble and responsive and, in a difficult operating environment, it provides for a reasonable prospect of stability.

We are also currently deriving a small income from training and consultancy. There is potential to grow this income but with a risk of diversion from our central mission.

To develop, test and assess an earned income programme which draws together the tools and resources we have developed.

# OUR ORGANISING MODEL

All our work is undertaken in collaboration. We have a core staff group of three: David, Immy and Sam, all part time, and a wider group of Associates, some are paid, some give their time, all are members of the team.

### Our Associates include:

- Catriona Maclay, champion of young people
- lona Lawrence, coalition and campaign builder
- Kate Weiler, facilitator and coach
- Katie Slee, graphic and service designer
- Neil Denton, conflict mediator
- Romek Goj, backend developer
- Tony Clements, council director
- Zahra Davidson, service designer

As a project within <u>Shift</u> (a registered charity) we benefit from access to the specialist skills and resources of the wider group and appropriate oversight.

It is barely October, but the older woman is dressed for winter. Her coat is glistening wet. She is fumbling in her many pockets, now in her bag. She needs her purse to pay for breakfast. The café assistant waits. There is no queue these days. There is no hurry.

The young woman at the window table, a stranger to the older woman, stands up and steps forward. "I'd like to pay for you," she says. The older woman shakes her head. The café assistant is briefly confused. "Please," she says, "I would like to."

The women sit at adjacent tables, as close as the new rules allow. When the man leaves, they are talking about children. The café assistant is speaking quietly to her colleague. She gestures to the table and they both look, but the women do not notice them. They are listening to each other.

It is all of little consequence, yet the man still thinks about it now. Perhaps the women do too because this is the way that kindness works.

Imagine a world of good relationships.



# **RELATIONSHIPS** PROJECT

### Get in touch

Whether you'd like to discuss an idea, challenge us on something, collaborate in some way or just have a chat, we'd love to hear from you. Follow us on Twitter <u>@Rships\_Project</u> or send us an email at <u>hello@relationshipsproject.org</u>.