The Asset-Based Area

Engaging and Empowering Communities: our shared commitment and call to action[1] underlines the sectors' commitment as national bodies to develop strong and inclusive communities. This briefing, which has been written by Alex Fox CEO of Shared Lives Plus and chair of TLAP Building Community Capacity network, sets out ten key features of an asset-based area. It also suggests a number of planning and support models that can help areas to make progress.

Who is this document for?

This briefing will be of interest to all of those working in the wider public sector including elected members, Adult Social Care, Public Health and Housing colleagues, Local Authority and Clinical Commissioning Group Strategic Commissioners, those involved in Sustainability and Transformation Plans and Accountable Care Systems, GP practices, Voluntary and Community Sector Enterprise colleagues, User Led Organisations, and all key national agencies.

In an age of austerity, increasing attention is paid to what councils and the NHS *cannot* do, making it vital to gain some clarity on what the organisations and people of each area *can* do. Every area and its citizens can achieve more when they combine their expertise, time, creativity and resources.

Decades of practice and research shows that this happens when:

- Everyone shares an asset-based mindset: looking first for what individuals, families and communities can, or could do, with the right support, rather than focusing exclusively on needs and problems.

- Services and organisations are co-produced with the people whose lives they touch. This means that everyone involved identifies priorities, co-designs services and systems, and works together wherever possible to co-deliver the work that takes place.

Every area already has at least some organisations, professionals and local people who take those approaches, but for them to have a wider and deeper impact, whole systems and areas need to be aligned around an asset-based approach. Many asset-based practitioners argue that

people can lead that change only when acting as local citizens, not when acting in professional or service leadership roles.

An asset-based public body does not have 'customers' (whose only responsibility is to pay taxes), rather it views everyone, including people with long term support needs, as citizens, with rights and responsibilities. Rather than 'providers',

asset-based areas have partners, who share responsibility for system design and the best use of resources. An asset-based area is responsive to need, but always looks for capability and potential. It is confident in the things it can do, and the difference its people's skills and expertise make, but it has the humility to recognise its limitations, namely to fix people or communities.

Making an area asset-based is difficult, but not necessarily complex. The asset-based area:

1 Maintains a living map of local assets[2] including: state budgets, social action, community groups and charities, services, private sector and enterprise, buildings, land and the money people themselves spend on care and support.

2 Actively relocates power to its citizens, seeing its role as working with, not for, people and bringing individuals and groups together. It sees partnership as its default mode with all of its staff and partners trained in asset-based thinking and co-production.

3 Invests in early intervention and community capacity building, understanding their outcomes and increasing investment in programmes which work.[3]

4 Expects all its activities and services to build people's resilience and social connections[4] with investment in models which demonstrate this.

5 Uses the Social Value Act[5] principles by default in all contracting and grant making.

6 Builds and sustains social and community enterprise[6] to increase the range of support models and accessible activities, in addition to developing and nurturing partnerships with local business.

7 Builds mutualism and shared ownership, including through use of the Localism Act, which increases year on year the proportion of the public service workforce who have current and recent lived experience of using services.[7]

8 Thinks in terms of neighbourhoods rather than statutory boundaries, and invests in connecting people within and between those neighbourhoods, alongside developing community capacity using a variety of asset-based models.

9 Measures all forms of social action including volunteering, and increasing investment in them, rather than seeing volunteering as 'free'.[8]

10 Has a shared set of outcomes measures for changes in people's lives, such as: wellbeing, resilience, independence, access to peer support and the ability to self-care. These measures can be used to understand the impact and cost-effectiveness of services.

Key features of asset-based planning and support models

There are a wide range of asset-based models upon which to draw. Effective and sustainable models tend to:

- Draw on an evidence base and identified model that can be co-produced with local people, for example refer to NICE Guidance.[9]
- Build local capacity and expertise, rather than relying on outside support.

Most approaches start by mapping an area's assets. Approaches to this include asset mapping and appreciative enquiry. The NHS Integrated Personalised Commissioning programme[10] has published a relevant guide. Where possible, asset maps should be 'open source', with a wide range of local people able to update and use them.

Co-production approaches include those outlined by Think Local Act Personal[11] and Coalition for Collaborative Care.[12]

Support models which draw (to varying degrees) on asset-based thinking include:

- Asset-based approaches to community development e.g. ABCD; [13] Asset-based consulting.[14]
- Approaches that support people to become active contributing citizens, and to find non service solutions whatever their life experience or impairment e.g. Local Area Coordination.[15]
- Community enterprise development e.g. Community Catalysts.[16]
- Circles of support e.g. Community Circles;[17] Circles Network.[18]
- Shared Lives: Local Shared Lives organisations can be found here.[19]
- Homeshare: Local Homeshare organisations can be found here.[20]
- Time-banking: Time Banks can be found here.[21]

- Time credits e.g. Spice.[22]
- Dementia-friendly communities.[23]
- Co-produced social prescribing approaches.
- Wellbeing teams[24]
- Leadership for Empowered and Healthy Communities programme[25] which supports leaders to grow and nurture capacity in communities to improve health and wellbeing

This is not an exhaustive list. Ultimately, all services can be offered in ways which aim to help people:

- To build and maintain family and social connections and relationships.
- To build their confidence, knowledge and resilience.

There are a number of ongoing debates around asset-based approaches. Definitions of 'community' range from being place-based to seeing communities of interest as more important. Communities and community development work can struggle to be inclusive of all groups, particularly minority groups and communities, and people with stigmatised health conditions.

Some asset-based thinking is very sceptical of the ability of organisations, particularly large organisations, to behave in a genuinely asset-based way and there are concerns that the language could be selectively appropriated to justify funding reductions for traditional services.

Asset-based approaches require a significant investment of time and resources and whilst they may result in reduced demand for state services, they cannot be introduced successfully with that aim.

Whilst it is vital that decision makers buy-in to asset-based thinking, ultimately it will be the buy-in and leadership of local people upon which success depends.

Further reading

Think Local Act Personal hosts a Building Community Capacity national network of practitioners working in this field. There are resources here.[26] The Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD),[27] located at the Center for Civic Engagement in Northwestern University, Chicago, has long been an international centre for practice and research in this field. See, for instance, Cormac Russell's TedX talk.[28]

Two key authors in this field, John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann (*The Careless Society: community and its counterfeits*; *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing A Community's Assets*). Critics of McKnight include Lynne Friedli, Mary Anne MacLeod and Akwugo Emejulu.

The work on 'Salutogenesis' by Aaron Antonovsky in the 1970s is critical in the development of asset-based thinking, as is the subsequent work by Bengt Lindstrom, Monika Eriksson, Antony Morgan, Erio Ziglio, Harry Burns, Jennifer McLean, Jane Foot and Trevor Hopkins.

Alex Fox of Shared Lives Plus has written about the application of asset-based approaches and similar thinking to service development (The new social care,[29] Royal Society of Arts, 2013, Can we have a People Powered NHS?[30] RSA, 2014).

References

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