



# Meeting as equals

Creating asset-based charities  
which have real impact

Alex Fox (Fellow)

# Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank the charity leaders who shared their stories, the RSA for publishing and launching the report, and NCVO for all their support and expertise in drafting it.

## **About the author**

Alex Fox OBE FRSA is chief executive of the charity Shared Lives Plus, a trustee of the Social Care Institute for Excellence, Vice Chair of the Think Local Act Personal national partnership, and sits on England's NHS Assembly. He chaired the government's review of health and care charities in 2016.

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# REALISING



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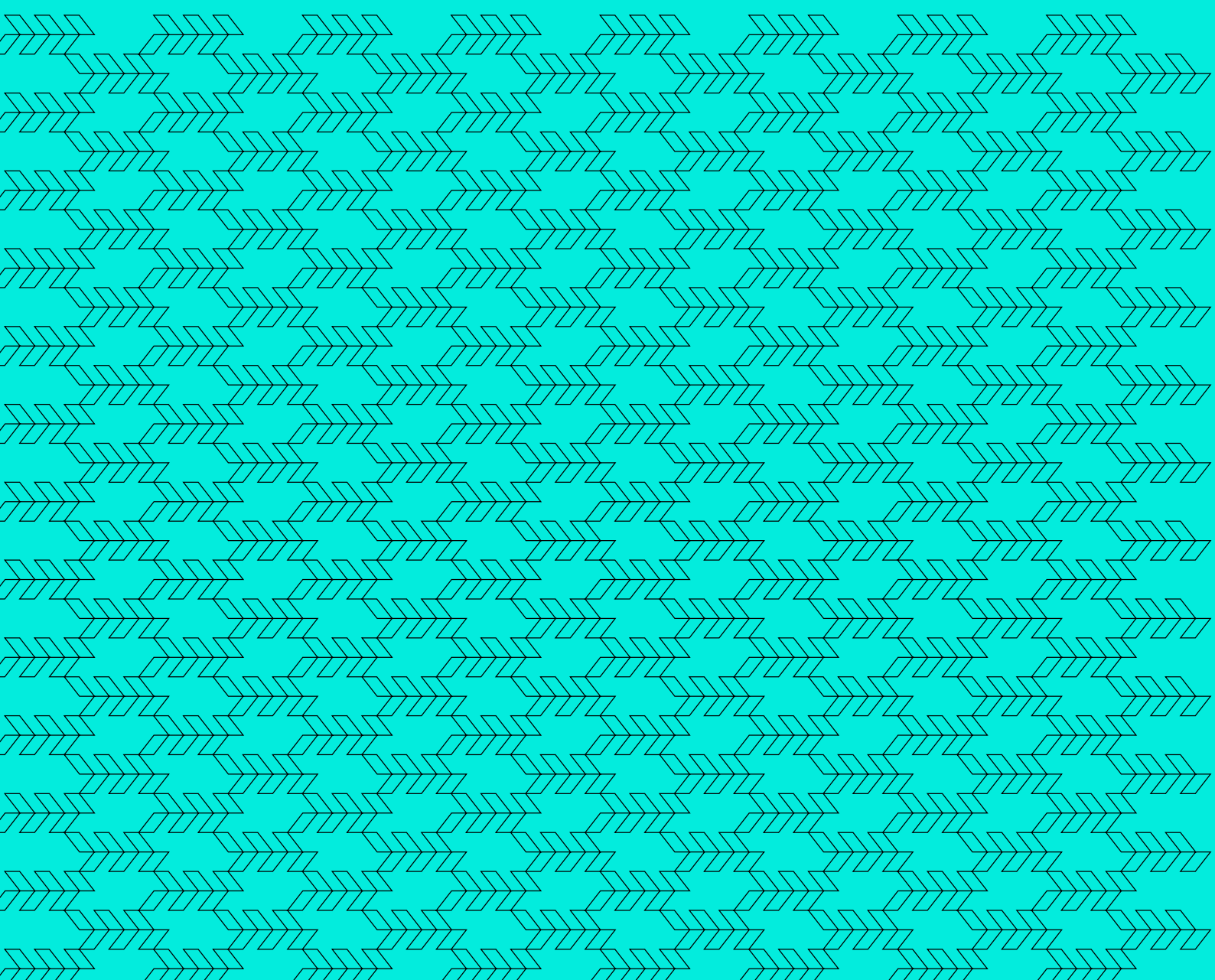
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**The RSA has thought a great deal** about what changes adopted during the pandemic should be preserved. Organisations moved towards lateral accountability to communities and service users, they collaborated more and the focus shifted to immediate impact. Leaders must avoid falling back into the old ways.

**Matthew Taylor, CEO, the RSA**



## RSA foreword

**A**lex Fox has been a cogent and influential third sector voice for many years. It is not surprising that he is once again being provocative in his analysis. As a long-time charity leader myself, I found this report both inspiring and humbling. I encourage every charity executive and board member to read and reflect on whether they and their organisations live up to the example set by Alex and the brave and innovative organisations he describes.

It goes almost without saying that the last few months have been challenging to the sector. Adopting completely different working patterns, furloughing and potentially laying off staff, finding new funding streams or facing ruin, most of all responding to new and often acute needs in the community; this has been the daily reality.

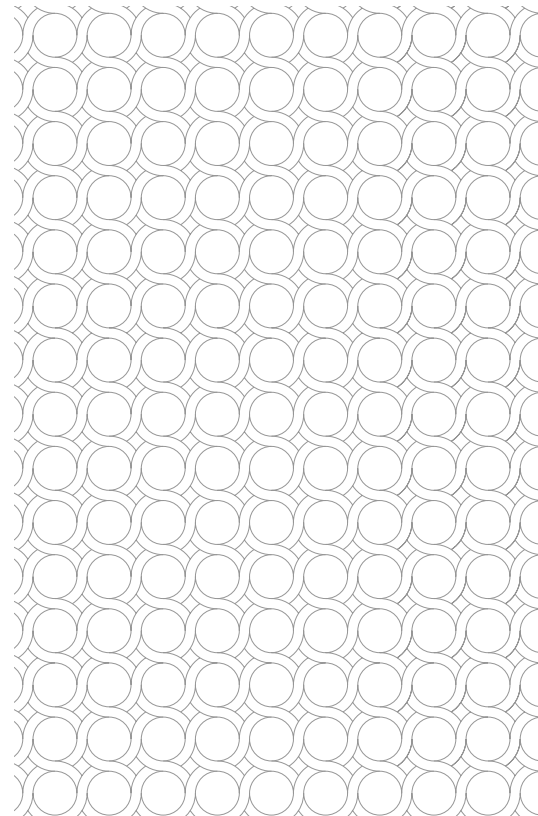
In such circumstances it may seem perverse to be self-critical and naive to pursue greater ambition. Yet true leadership must always be self-critical and must always be ambitious. The inspiring examples of asset-based approaches pursued in the deeply challenging context of the Covid-19 crisis described in this report have reminded me how often third sector leaders – among whom I certainly include myself - fall short by these measures.

The RSA has thought a great deal about which changes adopted during the pandemic we should try to preserve and how we might do so. Faced by the crisis and the scale of immediate need many organisations felt compelled to - and were in some ways more able to - set aside problematic ways of working. Upwards accountability to funders and various regulators was set aside in favour of lateral accountability to communities and service users. A focus on proxy and process objectives was replaced by the

need to make immediate impact. Regimes of competition and micro-managing procurement were pushed to one side as organisations collaborated and were funded more on the basis of need and trust.

The question now is how leaders and their organisations avoid falling back into the old ways of top-down, bureaucratic, unaligned and divisive forms of accountability. If this happens it will, at least in part, be our failure. Leaders must show the foresight, courage and canniness to co-create systems of accountability which align with charitable mission and impact.

**Matthew Taylor, CEO, the RSA**





## NCVO foreword

**I**n a year of crisis on a scale not seen in recent memory, Covid-19 attacked our health, kept us apart from our communities, devastated swathes of our economy and threatened our public services. Charities and community groups have been in the eye of the storm: hundreds of community groups quickly became lifelines as people everywhere came together in an outpouring of mass grassroots activism greater than that achieved by countless government programmes. As the stories in this paper show, some charities completely reimaged themselves and their priorities with an agility that the private and public sectors rarely manage. Communities are always the first responders in a crisis.

It was also a year of inequalities exposed and deepened. Not every street has formed a new self-support network and we have never been more aware of how deeply our communities can be divided, and how systemically black and minority ethnic communities and other groups can be excluded. To use an old phrase, we are all in the same storm, if not in the same boat.

Despite funders including government providing additional funds for charities, the Covid-19 crisis has severely tested our sector's financial model. Fundraising and trading remain under severe pressure. And as surveys repeatedly show, at a time when charities and community organisations are needed more than ever, they are stretched more than ever. A strange blend of fragility and resilience characterises civil society. So, charities are trying to reposition themselves and their work within a world that suddenly has different social attitudes, economic and technological norms. Many are doing that against a backdrop of furloughs, weariness and financial precarity. Many will not want to return to business as usual.

For those charities in financial crisis, the income-raising and cost-cutting challenges are likely to exclude all others for the time being. But any charity leader will also need to spare time and energy to engage with the emerging world. A world not 'post Covid-19' but more likely, an era where 'Covid-19 resilience' will also see steep rises in demand from all parts of society for what charities offer.

There will be volunteering in the new world, perhaps much more of it as we see a new desire for connecting and helping our neighbours, including the much vaunted 'micro volunteering' which now forms the basis of the huge new NHS Volunteer Responders scheme. There will be fundraising in the new world. There will be a need for organised community activity which goes beyond the scope of what can be self-organised on WhatsApp. There will be deepening inequalities. There is a burning desire for justice amongst those who are excluded and oppressed, which has always been there but has become that much harder for those in positions of power to ignore.

So beyond trying to rescue battered balance sheets, what can charities do to respond to the new needs, work with communities which are struggling to adapt to the 'new normal', and recapture the public's imagination?

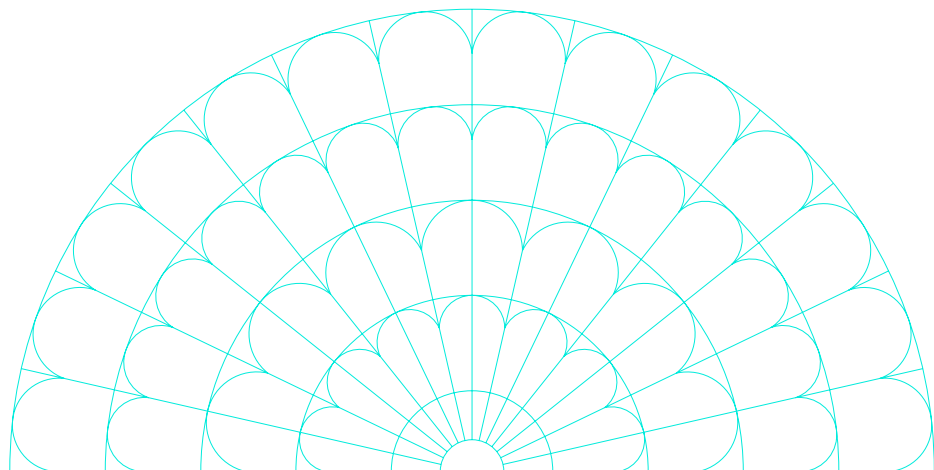
This is not primarily a challenge of organisational architecture, better communications or clever use of technology, although all of those have salience. The primary challenge is to understand the relationships people want with each other and with organisations which seek to work alongside them. It is about the shift from transactions to relationships, the shift from 'doing to' to 'doing with'.



This paper argues that *how* charities work can be as important as *what* they do. It challenges charities which are providing support to people to consider how they are not only doing that effectively, but also driving social change through the values and ethos they bring to their work. Each section of the report is deliberately provocative; asking charities to consider the power they hold and how they wield it. It is also practical and pragmatic; outlining the key behaviour changes we need to see at every level and collecting simple – if rarely easy – actions which charities can take to create more equal relationships and ultimately more impact on ever scarcer resources.

Charities need to look towards the future and to move with the pace of new technology and a rapidly changing world. But their long-established values remain their most important asset; whatever use charities make of tech and innovation in their work, it should be in the service of reaching people who are excluded, connecting those who are isolated, and distributing power more equally.

**Sarah Vibert, Acting CEO NCVO**



# FROM THE ERA OF SCALE TO THE ERA OF IMPACT

**We were asked to be like the private sector. Now our challenge is to distinguish ourselves from a private sector that has learned our language of community and social change, at a time of financial constraint.**

## Introduction: from the era of scale to the era of impact

**D**uring the Blair and Brown years investment in public services and charities generally increased. This period of relative prosperity and stability meant many charities grew their size, reach, impact and budgets. The Compact expressed the value government placed on charities and its respect for their independence.<sup>1</sup> Some of the organisations which grew most rapidly, however, did so through aligning themselves with national or local government goals, answering the challenge of the new public management model.<sup>2</sup> Some grew through prioritising delivering support over less fundable areas of work like community development and empowerment. Campaigning and external affairs teams could find themselves debating policy with national or local government organisations which were also major funders. Now some charities are trying to run large support operations on shoe-string public sector budgets, while also campaigning on the injustices of under-provision. The scale of some organisations can feel a long way from the communities which had first imagined and fought for their causes. When we need their help, can they meet us as equals?

While inequalities of gender, race, class and disability are reflected in the make-up of the sector's workforce, particularly at senior management level, organisations which have tackling equalities at their core, such as many black and minority ethnic (BAME) organisations and user-led and disabled people-led organisations have often been hardest and earliest hit by cuts.<sup>3</sup> Some small community providers fear being outcompeted by organisations which have the infrastructure to win funding but may not be better placed to reflect the communities they serve.

Many - if not most - charities with substantial public service contracts have spent recent years preoccupied by downsizing, restructuring and merging. With the economic impact of Covid-19 looking bleaker by the day, many will struggle to survive. For those which find themselves delivering public services at rock-bottom prices, struggling to pay even the living wage, in competition with private sector organisations, for contracts which place little value on outcomes, the question for leadership teams will be: 'what are we for?' If previous goals for greater scale feel out of reach in the immediate future, what is the route to greater impact?

### An emerging movement

We were asked to become more like the private sector and many of us succeeded. Now our challenge is to distinguish ourselves from that private sector at a time when the financial room for manoeuvre is narrowing. Meanwhile, the private sector learned our language of community and social change. Some corporates are building their social impact. The B Corp movement of corporates with a strong evidence of their ethical and environmental credentials is growing.<sup>4</sup> Other corporates use advertising which jumps on social movement bandwagons, enlist customers willing to volunteer as online brand ambassadors,<sup>5</sup> but do little to address the ethics of their supply chains.<sup>6</sup>

- 1 Compact Voice (2021) About Compact | Compact Voice. [online]. Available at: [www.compactvoice.org.uk/about-compact](http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/about-compact) [accessed 14 January 2021].
- 2 Which challenged organisations to be more efficient, better evidenced and grow the back-office infrastructure required to compete for contracts which (without much public debate) replaced grant-funding
- 3 National Survivor User Network (2019) The Value of User Led Groups (2019 campaign). [online]. Available at: [www.nsun.org.uk/faqs/the-value-of-user-led-groups-2019-campaign](http://www.nsun.org.uk/faqs/the-value-of-user-led-groups-2019-campaign) [accessed 14 January 2021].
- 4 For more information on B Corps, see [www.bcorporation.uk](http://www.bcorporation.uk).
- 5 Smith, B., Kendall, M., Knighton, D. and Wright, T. (2018) Rise of the Brand Ambassador: Social Stake, Corporate Social Responsibility and Influence among the Social Media Influencers. *Communication Management Review*. 3. pp. 6-29.
- 6 Steiner-Dicks, K. (2019) 'We know most global companies have modern slavery in their supply chains'. Reuters Events. [online]. Available at: [www.reuterevents.com/sustainability/we-know-most-global-companies-have-modern-slavery-their-supply-chains](http://www.reuterevents.com/sustainability/we-know-most-global-companies-have-modern-slavery-their-supply-chains) [accessed 14 January 2021].

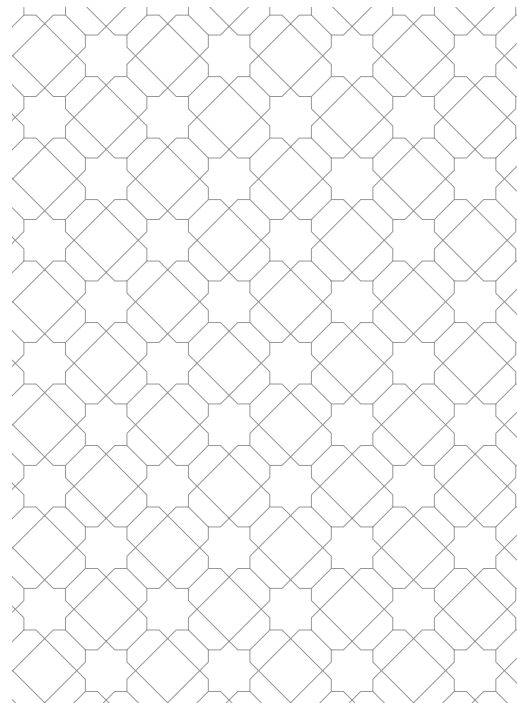
## Introduction

The good news is that many charities are showing us how to adapt, survive and thrive, not just financially, but ethically as well. They draw explicitly or implicitly on 'asset-based' thinking: the idea of looking first for what people can or could achieve with the right kinds of connections and allies, not just concentrating on what people need or what their problems are. Putting this into practice can involve radical restructuring of big service operations like Cornerstone's support services, which drew on the Dutch Buurtzorg model to experiment with self-managing teams backed up by coaches. An emerging movement of community-orientated organisations such as Shared Lives Plus, Community Catalysts, Local Area Coordination, Community Circles, Wellbeing Teams, care co-operatives, Mayday Trust, the Cares Family and others, are trying to live a set of values which feel like both a return to charity's roots, and a move away from the paternalism of the past. A new generation of start-ups is using technology and social media to form more equal connections between people and to get new people involved in social action and activism. Protest movements and campaigns have never been able to grow more rapidly, in ways which combine online and real life activity, as the Black Lives Matter movement has demonstrated.

Not all this activity is charitable. Some is constituted as social enterprise, some is technically private sector and some has no organisational form. Once we have decided how we work in the Covid-19 era, one of the questions the charity sector will need to wrestle with is the function of the charitable governance model: what was it designed to achieve, and does it succeed?

This is why the 'asset-based' way of thinking, (despite the jargony nature of the term), has such value for our sector, providing we are willing to be clear-eyed about the gaps which have appeared

between our roots in community activism, and the ways in which we may feel obliged to think and behave when the pressures on our organisations increase. Asset-based thinking means deeper, more effective and more equal relationships at the front line, but it is rooted in an idea of equality that, when it is real, can be traced from frontline to board. It is in tension with all forms of organisational governance, and ensuring those tensions are creative rather than destructive poses the trickiest questions for the biggest and most powerful organisations and their leaders. But as this report highlights, some of those leaders are engaging with those thorny questions - and are not shying away from the changes and innovations demanded by their answers.



### Case study 1

## Slung Low, aiming high

**S**lung Low has been a theatre company for twenty years, the first ten years focused on 'doing the current show well, to fund the next one'. A social enterprise in which everyone gets the same wage, Slung Low moved into railway bridge arches on the edge of Holbeck in inner city Leeds. Co-founder Alan Lane says: "We started to engage with the people and put shows on that people said they wanted. But they weren't coming. People said we were in the wrong place: you had to cross the red-light district to reach us."

Discovering the local working men's club, which is Britain's oldest, was in debt, while Slung Low had a large payment coming in from a successful production, they made an unusual deal: they would pay off the club's debts and the members' bar would share its building with arts and theatre.

"When COVID-19 hit, we shut the doors and thought 'what do we do now?'. We were already driving meals on wheels. We posted a letter through the nearest 200 doors to say we are here, we have transport, what do you need? Word got out - the council asked us to support 7500 households." Now a "reasonably busy" community theatre is a "very, very busy"



food bank with a 40-foot refrigerator in its car park. They have just passed 5500 food parcels and are the primary social care referral unit for the area.

This new drive hasn't so much replaced the theatre's mission as grown it: "We've put on 16 shows during lockdown: we were Britain's most prolific theatre at one point, giving the audience headphones to help them socially distance." The pay-what-you-decide Cultural Community College is still delivering arts-related adult education on everything from Indian cooking to open-fire pewter casting, making use of the woodland the organisation manages to move lessons outdoors during lockdown. Lane says: "We've discovered what it means to be in service to this area. My desire to make a big piece of outdoor theatre is irrelevant if people are too hungry to come to a play. Our funders are all arts funders, but they've backed us - so far."

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bank

**WHAT  
IS ASSET  
BASED  
THINKING**

**AND HOW  
DOES IT  
APPLY TO  
CHARITIES?)**

**Asset-based thinking shifts the approach** from what's wrong to what's strong, focusing on the capacities, skills and assets of people and communities.



## What is asset-based thinking and how does it apply to charities?

**F**ounders of the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute John Kretzmann and John McKnight described how low-income neighbourhoods were usually described in terms of their deficits, with outside agencies of middle-class people paid to fix them.<sup>7</sup> Instead, they proposed the development of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills and assets of those people and neighbourhoods.

Cormac Russell describes the shift as moving from ‘what’s wrong?’ to ‘what’s strong?’ where charities define the people they work with primarily or only in terms of their problems, those problems are likely to be most or all of what they see.<sup>8</sup> The disability rights movement has long argued for a similar shift in society’s view of

disabled people. An asset-based approach looks for what Sian Lockwood OBE of Community Catalysts describes as people’s “gifts, skills and assets” and attempts to build on them.

Asset-based thinking has its critics. It is not always clear how organisations can put its tenets into action, short of abolishing themselves, or what to replace them with if they do. In the UK, community development has a strong history, but has not always been strong on intersectionality, or felt fully inclusive of marginalised groups such as people with learning disabilities.

The ABCD Institute and others have produced numerous manuals for the practice of ABCD. The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and others have produced guides on ‘strengths-based’ approaches to supporting people, which have significant overlap with asset-based thinking. The Think Local Act Personal (TLAP) partnership has set out a comprehensive model for coproduction and the asset-based area model which sets out how whole-areas can embed asset-based thinking in everything they do.<sup>9</sup> It argues that local areas can only genuinely

### Box 1: Asset-based behaviour and attitude changes

- Seeing the whole person, including what they are or could be capable of, and their future goals, choices and dreams, not just their needs, health condition, current or past problems or the risks they are believed to carry. This also applies to seeing a community as, for example, more than its measures of deprivation.
- Trusting people to build control of their own lives, and any services they use. One expression of this, influenced by ABCD, was the advent of direct payments, which now see thousands of disabled people being given control of money in lieu of a health or social care service, which (in theory) they are free to spend on the support they feel will work best.
- Coproduction: enabling people to gain the resources, knowledge and networks to be able to share collective control of their area, co-designing and even co-delivering its services.

7 Kretzmann, J. (1993) *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets*. Chicago: ACTA Publications; McKnight, J. (1995) *The Careless Society: Community And Its Counterparts*. New York: Basic Books.

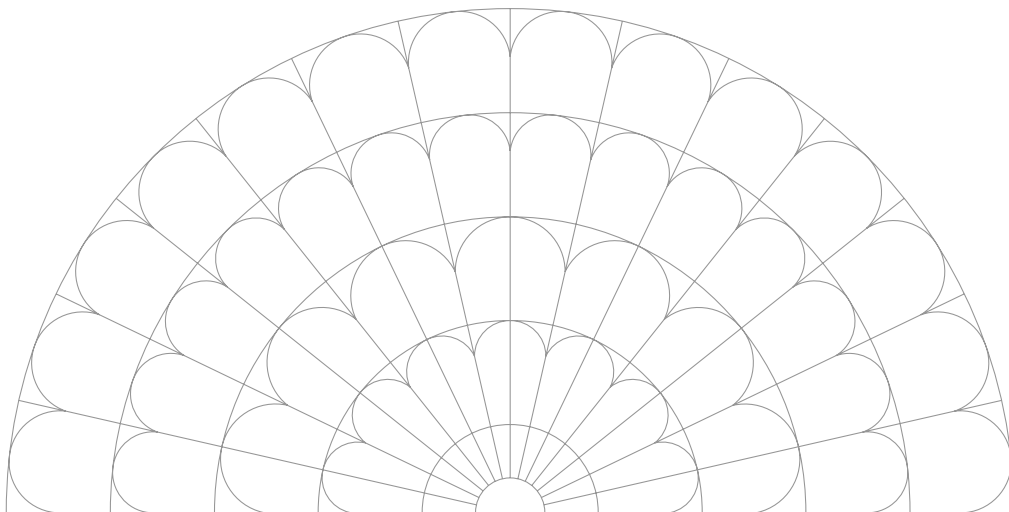
8 Russell, C. (2020) *Rekindling Democracy: A Professional’s Guide to Working in Citizen Space*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books.

9 Think Local Act Personal (2017) *The asset-based area*. [online]. Available at: [www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/Latest/The-Asset-Based-Area/](http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/Latest/The-Asset-Based-Area/) [accessed 14 January 2021].

## What is asset-based thinking?

pursue asset-based ways of working at a whole-system level. Wigan is the most celebrated example of attempting this: the Wigan Deal set out a new relationship between citizens and state. This paper makes the same argument about organisations: charities can only expect their staff or volunteers to become more asset-based in their practice, if the whole organisation is prepared to go on that journey.

ABCD can be seen as being sceptical of any kind of organised (or bureaucratic) service which intervenes in people's lives from the outside, including charities. So, what can charities draw from asset-based thinking? This report is not intended as another stick for charities to beat themselves with. It sets out the steps – many of them small and practical - that every charity can take towards changing everything we do, and arriving at some very old, as well as some very new answers to the question, “What are we for?”.



**Here are some of the steps**  
to take in order to become an  
asset-based charity.



# Building the asset-based charity

## Building the asset-based charity

This report sets out steps towards becoming asset-based in every area of charitable activity, drawing on examples of charities and

community organisations which have already demonstrated that change. The table below summarises those changes at a glance.

**Figure 1: The steps towards becoming an asset-based charity**

Area of change	Where we might be now	Towards becoming an asset-based charity
<b>Relationships</b>	We serve our beneficiaries. We are leaders.	We meet people as equals. We are allies.
<b>Recruitment</b>	Our team of experts and our beneficiaries come from different communities or backgrounds.	People with lived experience volunteer, work and lead at every level. We recruit from the communities we work in.
<b>Structure and scale</b>	We have many management layers. We spend significant amounts on staff turnover.	We create autonomous frontline roles, and devolve decision-making and power down, using data to empower & learn (not to police).
<b>Campaigning</b>	We set the agenda, deploy our expertise and engage stakeholders in our campaigns. Influencing often happens behind closed doors.	We find and develop leaders and enable people to identify and gather around their priority issues. We share our networks and power.
<b>Communications</b>	We set the agenda and manage our stakeholders, reputation and brand tightly, especially when under fire.	We share our platform and curate stories shared on people's own terms. When we make mistakes, we aim for transparency, not brand management.
<b>Fundraising</b>	We raise funds for our beneficiaries with hard-hitting campaigns about their problems.	Fundraising messages are co-designed and delivered by people with lived experience. We build communities before asking for money.
<b>Strategy, decision making, ownership</b>	Our leadership and board have limited accountability to beneficiaries. We include experts by experience on committees but worry it's tokenistic.	We invest in citizens' capacity to lead us at every level. National groups have many roots in local networks. We explore mutual ownership models.
<b>Commissioning</b>	We have many contracts which are unsustainable, or which force us into ethical compromises. We feel unable to influence commissioning.	We seek out commissioners who share our aims and encourage them to co-commission with us and communities. We are prepared to turn down work which cannot be delivered ethically.

## Building the asset-based charity

People who lead, work in or are offered support by the asset-based charity will start to behave differently. The table below highlights some new behaviours: some will be seen at every level; in all there are links between the behaviours seen across the different groups. For instance, the frontline behaviour changes below are only safe and sustainable for people where leaders change working environments.

**Figure 2: New behaviours under an asset-based approach**

<b>People with power</b>	<b>Workers and volunteers</b>	<b>Citizens</b>
We show empathy and humanity and feel valued.	We show empathy and humanity and feel valued.	We show empathy and humanity and feel valued.
We share power, are open to change and being led by others. We are present in our community, and build alliances.	We work alongside (not for) citizens, connecting ourselves and others. We support people to make choices and take risks.	We are active– doing and starting things in the community, with lots of connections.
We aim to create wellbeing. We trust colleagues and citizens and build healthy, learning workplaces. We measure good and bad impacts of our work.	We are free to be led by people, and can make decisions, doing what matters to people rather than to the system.	We define the lives we want to live, make choices and feel in control.  We can share our views with services and are listened to.
We create roles which give people the time and trust to build deep relationships.	We work with people's capacity not just their needs. We show humility and courage at the right times.	We can access support which helps us pursue our idea of a good life, and to take the lead.
We offer whole-family and whole-household assessments and plans.	We can work whole-family or household and with family carers.	We're in control of our support plans and who sees our information.
We are happy in our roles and help others to be.	We are happy in our roles and help people to live good lives.	We pursue good lives and have positive relationships.

## Case study 2

# Recovery Connections: asset-based working in practice



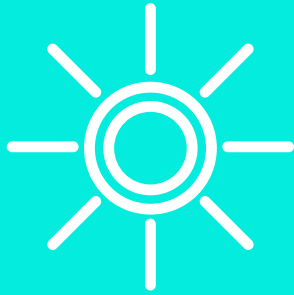
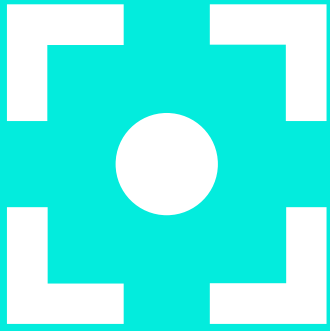
**D**ot Smith describes her organisation Recovery Connections as, among other things, “messy”. The Care Quality Commission describes it as “outstanding”, an exceptionally rare accolade in the residential rehab sector. Dot works with a team in which the majority of people have lived experience of their own or a family member’s substance misuse, to recognise and value the entirety of that lived experience: which means creating a working environment which can cope with the impact of trauma. The team at Recovery Connections need to feel able to bring all of themselves to work, as part of creating an environment which is genuinely non-judgemental and empowering for the people they work with. This approach enables the team and the people using the service to meet as equals, with shared experiences. It requires the team not only to be able to work with others’ trauma, but also with their own, hence a “messiness” which brings its own risks and challenges, but avoids the empathy and humanity deficit which can afflict organisations which believe that a team of humans can be relentlessly professional, positive and boundaried at all times.

This ‘eyes open’ pragmatism informs Dot’s view of working through the pandemic; an experience which she says is leaving ‘some of us stronger and others less so’. The high awareness of anxiety, trauma and the stages of grief helped the team to navigate differing reactions to some services or forms of contact stopping or changing dramatically. But a recent evaluation also found unexpected benefits for some, for whom moving online allowed them to ‘open up’ their world and be “there for each other”, or who say they engaged with the service for the first time because they didn’t have to attend a building. It was essential however to be led by individuals as to how they accessed online support, such as having a camera-off option, rather than expecting them to fit with the new model. Staff and participants said: “As recoverees, how ingenious we are. We get on anything and do anything that is going to help us in our recovery” and “there is real strength within the recovery community”. The evaluation found it was important that many of the staff were also in recovery, which provided a “massive sense of unity” where no one would be judged.

Recovery Connections is at once messy, outstanding, and also ingenious.



**What is the good life** and how can we get there together? This question should underpin any review of a service or organisation.



# Creating more impact

## with fewer resources

## Creating more impact with fewer resources

“Human rights begin in the small places, close to home.”

Eleanor Roosevelt

### Start with the good life question

**T**he short-term pressures for many organisations are to cut costs and create efficiencies. But the end goal cannot be less of what we currently achieve. Where charities are able to stabilise their balance sheets in the short-term, the pressing question becomes what can we do with what we've got? Or put another way, What are we for? Asset-based thinking suggests that the key to answering those questions is to ask the people whom the charity has traditionally tried to help: what does a good life look like to you, and how could we get there together?

This needs to be an inclusive and wide conversation with everyone we try to serve. (Ideally it comes before questions about improving, changing or closing existing services, but for some charities, some urgent cost-reduction questions will need addressing first.) Two key groups of people to involve are:

1. Those who make most use of the organisation's services
2. Those who are poorly reached, ignored or excluded by the organisation.

### A new kind of support role

Having set new goals in closer partnership with the people previously thought of as beneficiaries, but now thought of as co-leaders or co-owners, asset-based charities will think deeply about how to get to their new shared destination. This means a move away from relationships which create dependence and power inequalities, and which are grounded in deficit-focused and gift-model thinking, towards support relationships which are more equal and reciprocal. This will mean creating roles in which people can meet as equals and where both can bring more of themselves to working together creatively on the goal of a good life, which can also be thought of as wellbeing.<sup>10</sup> People who want help will be able to choose who helps them, and build a smaller number of deeper relationships, with people they are confident are likely to stay with them for longer. Those helpers will be more likely to come from the same communities or backgrounds as the people seeking support. Creating new relationships on the ground is not just a culture change or a training challenge, it requires an operational model which:

- builds in time for relationships to be chosen, form and deepen
- assesses performance in terms of people's wellbeing, independence, achievement of personal goals, and experiences of support
- enables individuals and workers the freedom to define a working relationship that works for them, within defined parameters.

<sup>10</sup> See Care Act 2014. (s.1) London: HMSO for a holistic definition of wellbeing as the core statutory role of social care services.

### **Box 2: Loss Project**

The Loss Project is a new social enterprise that aims to build the capacity and confidence of communities to support themselves and each other with all forms of grief, loss and trauma. During the pandemic the project worked with people who had lost someone to co-design a digital loss box of resources they felt others in similar situations would benefit from. Participants were clear that they did not want “another service”. Founder Carly Attridge said: “Participants wanted to co-design a community response to grief and loss. They wanted to do it for themselves and most importantly to connect with others.”

In a deep recession, these ways of working have the potential to create more value and impact from fewer resources, and with more of the available resource in high-impact frontline roles, rather than in middle management and back offices. Roles of this kind will need a strengths-based approach to recruitment: channelling more of the available resources into recruiting for success – the right people in the right roles - but potentially saving the money currently spent on managing performance and high levels of sickness and turnover. The Shared Lives model demonstrates it is possible to develop deep, reciprocal support relationships, even within a model of regulated social care (one which the Care Quality Commission (CQC) consistently rates as the sector’s highest-performing with 96 percent good or outstanding).

Even most unpaid volunteer roles are tightly defined by the host charity. This can be necessary for some roles, but it can also limit the volunteer’s scope for using their particular skills, and it puts boundaries around the kinds of relationships that volunteers can have with the people they support. ‘Gift model’ help is help that is given by ‘us’ to ‘them’: the gift of *my* expertise to fix *your* life. [St Joseph’s hospice](#) noticed that there was a gap in the support

which families were looking for that was not easily filled by traditional volunteering and developed Compassionate Neighbours.

As Recovery Connections shows, one of the most effective ways to create more equal relationships between ‘workers’ and ‘beneficiaries’ is to reject those labels and recruit people with lived experience into the team. The learning disability support sector is one where this has been very much the exception rather than the rule, but the user-led organisation CHANGE bucked that trend.

### **Box 3: Imagineer**

The organisation acts as brokers support packages for people using direct payments to purchase their own care. They have taken a holistic view of physical, emotional and social wellbeing, running live-streamed ‘Beat It’ nights with DJs taking requests into the night alongside catch-ups over Zoom (which have now become a new organisation, People Need Purpose), developing free information for people employing personal assistants during the pandemic, and supporting people who use services to volunteer in their local communities.

# Shared Lives



Image: Meg (right) and her dog Flower, together with Shared Lives carer Hayley

**T**he Shared Lives model, which now reaches nearly 15,000 people. Shared Lives carers are recruited and approved over a period of months by their local CQC-regulated provider, which is either a commissioned charity or run in-house by the council itself. Approved Shared Lives carers are then matched with an adult who has a learning disability, mental ill health or another long-term support need. Once a match is found which both feel will work, they share their lives, with the individual either visiting their chosen Shared Lives carer regularly for short breaks, or moving in with them, as Meg did when she moved in with Shared Lives carer Haley, as her route away from living on a mental health ward at a point when she was medically well enough to leave, but would need to build a life from scratch.<sup>11</sup> Shared Lives carers are trained and paid, but they and their families provide much which is unpaid to the people they share their lives with, spending family occasions and holidaying together, for instance. The Shared Lives

relationship exists within the framework of regulated care but is also very personal. It is common to hear that he or she 'is just part of the family and we love them'. Meg says that after a period of being seen only in terms of risk and illness, she has "made friends and been on adventures." That network of support has led to paid work and a flat of her own. Key to success is investment in recruiting the right people for defined, but highly autonomous roles, and then enabling people to choose relationships which work, with plans and structure in place to respond to any problems.

Getting the right people into the right support relationships is key

<sup>11</sup> See more about Meg's story at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kK0\\_Bz4FdTQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kK0_Bz4FdTQ) [accessed 11 December 2020].

### **Box 4: Compassionate Neighbours**

The hospice movement was founded on the view that a good death is a social, not a medical event, but the NHS now leans heavily on hospices, which have, like many charities delivering public services, 'professionalised' as they deliver highly sophisticated medical care alongside social and community-orientated activities.

Where families do not have a strong extended family or friend network, the hospice felt there could be a new role, and partnered with St Christopher's Hospice to develop a model inspired by the compassionate communities movement, and the Neighborhood Network in Palliative Care in Kerala, India. Compassionate Neighbours form bonds with people touched by end of life issues or serious illness, who might otherwise be isolated, visiting regularly, listening, or providing practical help so that the people they work with can remain connected to their local community and receive vital support at a vulnerable time in their lives. Neighbours have more scope to define their role around whatever skills or capabilities they feel they have, and they are matched with people with similar interests or outlooks. The role is more open-ended with the hospice recruiting the right people, preparing them well, and as a result having confidence in them to let go. The programme values lived experience and aims to be a way for a more diverse group of people to get involved on their own terms. Some will also use their experiences to start conversations with community groups and local people about end of life, breaking down taboos: "I used to go past [the hospice] on the bus and now I know that it is a place that's alive and not about death".

### **Can we still scale? Should we?**

The support models which we intuitively feel are right— which are personalised, warm and chosen - are often those which feel small and personal. However, the financial challenge for many charities is to reach large numbers of people with limited or reducing resources. How do organisations, particularly the largest ones, 'scale down' impersonal models and return to their community roots, without reaching fewer people? Which organisational structures enable decentralisation, but greater reach?

Since the 1990s, it has been accepted that scale and reach are a key measure of a charity's success and value. Few high-flying CEO careers have been built on keeping an organisation small, much less shrinking it. But scale without differentiation does not equal value and many public service delivery contracts have been pared back to a very basic service which could be delivered by any type of organisation. Equally, our sector is littered with the remnants of small organisations which delivered a much-loved service to a local community but were unable or unwilling to reach beyond that place or did not survive the retirement of their founders.

One approach is to move out of service delivery sectors or models which feel restrictive, outdated or which offer few opportunities to add social value or drive societal change. The disability charity, Scope, is one of very few national organisations to take the radical step of divesting itself of its large support operation, in order to focus on information, advice, online communities and campaigning.

Another is to end contracts which take the charity away from its values, and attempt to redefine what good looks like, starting with a smaller number of imaginative and

committed commissioners. The Mayday Trust (see page 36) took this risky and bold approach. National organisations which are networks of local branches or partners can have more scope to add the strength and breadth of national scale to the depth of locally-led organisations.

The 'rainbow' of asset-based innovations in community-centred support produced by Think Local Act Personal; the Social Care Institute for Excellence, and Nesta, is a growing catalogue of asset-based charities and social enterprises which are in many cases exploring different approaches to scaling without losing touch with their values.<sup>12</sup> Key questions for organisations which are successful in a place but now want to scale include:

- How much fidelity to the model (and brand) to aim for, and how much local flexibility? How to provide templates and resources to avoid reinventing the wheel, without creating a new bureaucracy?
- Are there aspects of a small-scale approach which are unique to its original community or circumstances? What can be adapted and adopted elsewhere?
- What governance and business model is right for its current and future stakeholders, and is the model financially viable at different scales?
- How can the power and influence of citizens and communities remain strong, as the organisation grows beyond the scale at which its stakeholders have frequent contact and personal relationships?

During the pandemic, Think Local Act Personal gathered accounts of how these organisations have transformed their work in response to the crisis, such as Imagineer.

### **Box 5: Mencap**

Mencap's CEO Edel Harris is engaging with her 8000 strong workforce in a far-reaching strategy discussion, which aims to move from a centralised model in which people "wait for permission", towards empowered local teams who can always be centred on "what individuals and communities are telling us will make the UK the best place in the world for people with a learning disability to live happy and healthy lives". Data will be used to learn and improve, not manage performance. Mencap isn't doing this through setting out specific strategic objectives for the next five years, but instead through developing "a way of working that allows for flexibility in the type of activity, support and services they offer to people and communities, that is responsive to their specific needs, hopes and dreams." Unlike other organisational strategies, Mencap doesn't pretend to have all the answers. The question is not 'how can Mencap fix things?' but rather, 'as we stand beside you how can we support you to create change?' Mencap will be offering its workers more autonomy and less bureaucracy, as well as drawing more on "the strengths of the individual with a learning disability and the community". This change is expressed not just in what will happen but also how workers will feel: involved and in control, more satisfied and more "present and active in your community."

<sup>12</sup> Think Local Act Personal (2021) Innovations in community-centred support. [online]. Available at: [www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/innovations-in-community-centred-support](http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/innovations-in-community-centred-support) [accessed 14 January 2021].



### **Box 6: CHANGE**

25 years ago, when people's expectation of people with learning disabilities was that they would attend a day centre, CHANGE built its work around a 'co-worker' model, in which disabled and non-disabled colleagues shared roles on equal pay, terms and conditions. This enabled people with learning disabilities who had not previously been empowered or even employed to take on leadership roles. Some built the confidence to co-work with each other, travelling unsupported to eastern Europe to be keynote speakers at conferences, for instance. This model opened up the possibility of role-modelling real employment and leadership for other people with learning disabilities. Philipa Bragman, CHANGE's former director, stresses that people with learning disabilities are not one homogeneous group: "Intersectionality is fundamental to supporting people with learning disabilities to feel strong in their identities and take their power. So, our projects on BAME and LGBT people with learning disabilities were delivered by people from those groups, and parents who have learning disabilities co-designed and delivered our work on supporting mums and dads". In their work on influencing NHS policy after the Winterbourne View abuse scandal, the workers at CHANGE told national leaders at a summit they led: "Don't call me a service user – I'm a professional just like you." NHS England now employs some people with learning disabilities in leadership positions, but there remain organisations whose missions are equalities for people with learning disabilities, but who do not routinely employ disabled people themselves.

### Actions

- 1.** Begin a conversation with stakeholders and those currently poorly reached or excluded from the organisation, which starts with the 'good life' question and which drives strategy and service design.
- 2.** Devolve responsibility to the most local level, using a network or partnership model which maximises the value added by both national and local organisations.
- 3.** Invest in values-based recruitment and create outcome-focused roles in which workers can make decisions based primarily on what people (not organisations) want.
- 4.** Audit equalities to identify the diversity of people working in and using the service; create a plan to tackle inequalities.
- 5.** Large organisations should identify teams or local areas willing and able to act as pioneers and beacons for locally-led innovation, sharing learning and inspiration across the wider organisation.
- 6.** Start-ups should plan for the level of scale which feels right for them and identify the core practices and values which will remain in place through scaling.

# REBUILDING FUNDRAISING AND VOLUNTEERING

**For people to lead their own civil rights movements, charities and their managers will need to be more humble as leaders and more ambitious as allies. From volunteering, to campaigning and fundraising, our new relationships will involve sharing power, resources and responsibilities.**

## Rebuilding fundraising and volunteering: new relationships with the public

### Who leads?

“People with learning disabilities are one of the few groups of people systematically excluded from what should be their own civil rights movement.”

Phillipa Bragman, former CEO of CHANGE.

People must lead their own civil rights movements, and traditional charity policy work is not adapting rapidly enough to an era when power has shifted away from Whitehall and transformative social movements can emerge from an individual story, spread virally, and reject central control. The charity sector has formidable resources and national infrastructure: to remain relevant to a generation which does not wait for permission to raise its voice, we need to demonstrate we are willing to use our resources not only in support of our own operational goals and immediate stakeholders, but as allies to a wider range of grassroots groups. This will mean building trust, demanding less control and taking more short-term risks, but it will build the campaigns, messages and stories which will capture the public’s imagination and build a new generation of leaders who have lived experience and a powerful voice.

Charity leaders are used to occupying positions of power while being applauded for the virtue of their work. This is a form of privilege which brings with it the well-documented risks all forms of privilege bring.<sup>13</sup> Leaders of asset-based charities will need to give up elements of that privilege and put that power at the service of others: more humble as leaders but much

more ambitious as allies. Many charities say their goal is a world where they will no longer need to exist; a more realistic first step may be to become organisations led by the people who currently need their help. This would require recruiting a different mix of people, building their leadership capacity, and then developing operating structures which enable a wider group of people to lead in different ways. NCVO offer a guide for charities to live up to their ethos.<sup>14</sup>

### Box 7: Pembroke House

A centre for social action and residential community in Walworth, south-east London. During the pandemic they had to close buildings, but as well as becoming an emergency food distribution hub and keeping community going online, they have found innovative ways of building action and engagement, such as the food conversation chain, a ‘daisy-chain’ style series of discussions in which people who want a neighbourhood where no one is without food agree to be contacted by one person for a conversation, with some prompts. They then connect to another person for another conversation. The initiator of each conversation records it and the views and insights gathered are built into an action plan.

13 See Be More Pirate (2019) The self-loathing NGO. [online]. Available at: [www.bemorepirate.com/new-blog-1/2019/4/9/the-self-loathing-ngo](http://www.bemorepirate.com/new-blog-1/2019/4/9/the-self-loathing-ngo) [accessed 14 January 2021].

14 NCVO (2019) Charity ethical principles. [online]. Available at: [www.ncvo.org.uk/policy-and-research/ethics/ethical-principles](http://www.ncvo.org.uk/policy-and-research/ethics/ethical-principles) [accessed 14 January 2021].

Web platforms such as 38 Degrees and SumOfUs have developed a model of campaigning which is entirely decentralised, with all campaigns being initiated and sometimes crowd-funded by their members. This can work best for campaigns which are relatively easy to communicate and have wide appeal, but less well for campaigns on issues where the solutions are complex, or which only affect a small group of people, particularly from oppressed groups. There remains a role, then, for charities to build evidence, attract funding for less popular causes, work on complex issues with policy makers, and to connect people who might otherwise be isolated voices.

### Service delivery vs campaigning?

A question often asked of large service-delivery charities is whether delivering state-funded services is compatible with campaigning, when one of the key issues for people who use support is the adequacy of state-funded services and the welfare state within which they are offered. Some feel this tension is best managed by splitting into a voice and a delivery arm, which could share a parent body, or form an ongoing partnership. Others argue that delivering a service can strengthen and legitimise the organisation's voice and build the evidence base for its social change messages. If any organisation operates as both a delivery and campaigning organisation, there needs to be clear, inclusive and open systems to enable (those who use the organisation's services) to criticise it. This could include access to independent advocacy and legal support. The further a charity has moved towards a culture of co-production, peer-review and open conversations about difficult issues, the more likely it is that there will be trust and constructive working relationships in place when, as is inevitable in any service, something goes wrong.

### **Box 8: RECLAIM and the Roots Programme**

Ruth Ibegbuna founded RECLAIM, a social action and youth leadership programme in Manchester, which was successful in reaching and engaging young people from the communities it served. But Ruth identified the point at which RECLAIM started to make a step change in achieving its mission of empowerment and equality as being when the young people and their parents rejected labels like 'disadvantaged' which the organisation had, like so many charities, used in its publicity and fundraising, and instead reformed its mission around ambition and pride in who they were: "working class young people being seen, being heard and leading change." Ruth, who now leads the Roots Programme, which brings influencers from different social backgrounds together across divides, recognised that RECLAIM needed to embody the leadership equality it was seeking, otherwise it would just be another well-meaning charity whose mission was undermined by working in a way "that prevents working class young people with talent, imagination, ambition and drive, from fulfilling their leadership potential."

15 Burt, E. (2020) 'Bloody funny. Bloody cross': Why outrage and humour work for Bloody Good Period. Third Sector. [online]. Available at: [www.thirdsector.co.uk/bloody-funny-bloody-cross-why-outrage-humour-work-bloody-good-period/management/article/1670731](http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/bloody-funny-bloody-cross-why-outrage-humour-work-bloody-good-period/management/article/1670731) [accessed: 14 January 2021].

### Asset-based fundraising

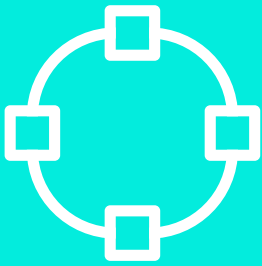
Language can be important and illuminating: the language of charities and their 'beneficiaries' locates value and responsibility in the charity alone. Gabby Edlin, founder of Bloody Good Period, says: "It's so patronising. To call them beneficiaries is to assume we are changing their lives".<sup>15</sup> 'Customers' are generally required to bring nothing to a transaction except money, which, in the case of those using a charity's services, is likely to be the one thing they lack. Asset-based charities are more likely to have 'participants', 'partners', 'owners' and 'colleagues'. Those more reciprocal relationships will be seen to run throughout all of a charity's operations: consider the message sent, for instance, by a fundraising department that is staffed entirely by non-disabled people (like 97 percent of paid fundraisers) and focuses on non-disabled people achieving their sporting goals to raise money for disabled people.<sup>16</sup> Asset-based fundraising is likely to be characterised by fundraising teams which:

- employ people with lived experience, including in public-facing and street-fundraising
- co-design fundraising campaigns with the people they support, and are open to supporting entirely locally led fundraising which fits with their mission and values
- use communications which highlight the agency and leadership of people with lived experience supporting themselves and others with similar experiences. As Edlin says, "We never fundraise using sad stories."

### Actions

- 1.** Adopt a user-led governance model and shared decision-making at every level.
- 2.** Create opportunities for a wider range of people to initiate and lead campaigns on the issues which matter most to them and diversify the range of voices speaking on the core mission.
- 3.** Find ways for people at the grassroots to share in our resources, power and platforms.
- 4.** Have open conversations about any tensions between service delivery and campaigning work, exploring operational or governance changes to resolve them.
- 5.** Identify concentrations of unchecked power within the organisation and adopt anti-oppression and anti-bullying practices.

<sup>16</sup> Change Collective (2019) Who isn't in the room: equality, diversity and inclusion in the fundraising profession. Institute of Fundraising. [pdf]. Available at: [www.ciof.org.uk/events-and-training/resources/change-collective-report-2019-who-isn-t-in-the-room](http://www.ciof.org.uk/events-and-training/resources/change-collective-report-2019-who-isn-t-in-the-room) [accessed 15 January 2021].



**In a time of scarce resources, charities and commissioners need more collaborative relationships based on identifying and achieving shared goals and outcomes which mean most to people themselves**

# **Thriving in the coming recession**

## Thriving in the coming recession: a new relationship with council and NHS commissioners

**I**n Chapter 4, we outlined the new operating model needed to enable workers and the people they seek to support to develop deeper, more reciprocal, empowering relationships. This will require a new relationship with commissioners, in which traditional procurement, based on unit-cost and quality, is replaced by commissioning for holistic, longer-term outcomes for the individual and for the whole system, rather than just one public service. Acting director at Thurrock council, Les Billingham, who commissions a wide range of asset-based approaches, says: "The approaches we commission will often cost less and rarely more, but if we start with the goal of saving money, we will not develop the right mix of services in the right way. We needed to take a leap of faith and start by trying to do the right thing." This became more rather than less important during the pandemic. As the Care Quality Commission said in 2020: "The voluntary sector played a critical role in supporting health and social care to keep people safe. System-wide leaders were concerned about capacity to meet the demands of subsequent peaks without this support."<sup>17</sup>

Lambeth council and partners including the charity, Certitude, used the collaborative alliance contracting model to enable a group of local charities to build an alliance in which providers and commissioners agreed on a shared set of outcomes for mental health services, and a shared risk and reward system for achieving them together. This offers the possibility of charities marrying their influencing goals with their work shaping and delivering

commissioned services. Influencing work can benefit hugely from the evidence gathered from supporting people, and services can in turn be shaped by effective voice work. This can only be realised if people who use those services have a real voice within any partnership and where there is a clear and public understanding between the different parties on their right to disagree with each other.

### Whole-area transformation

In 2016, the government commissioned the Joint VCSE Review, which was coproduced with the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. In 2018 it produced an action plan that recommended the shift towards "co-designing health and care systems with citizens and communities, through working with community-rooted organisations which can reach and engage citizens from all parts of local communities."<sup>18</sup> The review's advisory group argued that co-design with those groups would result in health and care services which are more personalised and focused on building wellbeing and resilience, which would lead to "a bigger, strategically-resourced role for those VCSE services which demonstrate they can provide support which thinks and acts whole-person, whole-family and whole-community." Subsequent research on commissioning found that some health and care commissioners had moved from a traditional view of VCSE organisations as competing providers, towards a model of VCSE organisations as co-design partners.<sup>19</sup> It is this more collaborative approach to identifying what will be valued and resourced which is needed for asset-based models like Wellbeing Teams to scale.

17 Care Quality Commission (2020) The state of health care and adult social care in England 2019/20. [pdf]. Available at: [www.cqc.org.uk/publications/major-report/state-care](http://www.cqc.org.uk/publications/major-report/state-care) [accessed 15 January 2021].

18 VCSE Review (2018) The Joint VCSE Review Action Plan. [pdf]. Available at: [www.vcsereview.org.uk/2018-action-plan](http://www.vcsereview.org.uk/2018-action-plan) [accessed 14 December 2020].

19 Baird, B. Cream, J. and Weaks, J. (2018) Commissioner Perspectives on Working with the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector. The King's Fund. [pdf]. Available at: [www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/commissioner-perspectives-voluntary-community-social-enterprise-sector](http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/commissioner-perspectives-voluntary-community-social-enterprise-sector) [accessed 15 January 2021].



# Cornerstone



**T**he Scottish learning disability support organisation Cornerstone was wrestling with the impact of austerity on its commissioned services and experiencing real challenges in paying the real living wage to its support workers. Inspired by the Buurtzorg devolved, self-managing local teams model, Cornerstone reformed central functions around a model in which local teams would have autonomy to make their own decisions about budgeting, recruitment and dealing with other multi-disciplinary professionals, with access to expert support and advice from the central team, rather than having to look centrally for every important decision. Cornerstone slimmed down their central functions in place and then invited its workforce to move to the new model, rather than imposing it from the top down. To begin with only a handful of teams took up that invitation, but momentum gathered and now over half the workforce have made the transition. An array of restrictive policies and procedures have been slimmed down to a small number of essential policies.

Cornerstone's CEO, Hazel Brown, describes both the gains and challenges of this model. Teams which had worked closely together were often more able to move away from a managed to a coached model, but more coaching and mentoring was needed than anticipated. The IT package needed to collect and manage cost and performance data took much longer than anticipated, but intranet use during this year has increased around 15-fold. Remote working for fairly new self-organised teams has been challenging, and crisis response during the pandemic has required more central direction.

The key challenge for Cornerstone has been that this model which creates more fulfilling jobs, asks more of frontline staff and pays them an enhanced rate of pay, relies on a move from traditional time-and-task procurement to outcome based commissioning, which many commissioners have proved unable to move to at pace. Brown said: "We've learned huge amounts. It's still a work in progress with lots of challenges – but we one thing we won't do is go back to what we had before."

Cornerstone slimmed down their central functions in place and then invited its workforce to move to the new model rather than imposing it from the top down

## Box 9: Wellbeing Teams

Wellbeing Teams is a start-up community interest company (CIC) that provides integrated, holistic community care has already been awarded 'outstanding' by the CQC inspector. The CQC has a regulation 'sandbox' project, in which regulator and innovative providers explore new regulatory approaches to fit innovative new models.

The self-managing model is attracting huge interest, partly through the work and rapid scaling of Dutch community care organisation: Buurtzorg examined along with Wellbeing Teams and others in a recent RSA briefing paper.<sup>20</sup> Early learning suggests that the new collaborative model is only tenable with some key underlying factors in place:

- Recruitment and staff development is refocused on the values, communication and decision-making skills needed to make the model work
- A wider cultural change in which the organisation devolves powers, coproduces and localises
- Commissioners who are willing to work with the newly devolved model.

The asset-based area model developed by Think Local Act Personal set this change in commissioning culture in the wider context of whole-area change.<sup>21</sup> Areas like Wigan, which set out a new relationship between the council, communities and community organisations in the Wigan Deal, typically invest in their voluntary sector as part of a strategic set of goals, rather than as an afterthought. The model sets out a ten-step approach in which commissioners and their partners are encouraged to move towards, which was revised in partnership with 15 councils in 2020:

- 1** We have a shared story about the change we want
- 2** We find and use community assets
- 3** We co-design with people who use services and who miss out

- 4** At work we can be ourselves, connect, be creative and act
- 5** We make systems and services simple and human
- 6** Wherever we can we plan and act early, assess later
- 7** We co-commission a wide range of local enterprises
- 8** We plan and organise in places people feel they belong to
- 9** We share power, resources and risks; we learn
- 10** We use shared measures of wellbeing, resilience and equality.

## Actions

- 1.** Move from responding to funding opportunities, towards offering high value services which reflect the charity's values and what citizens are asking for. Work collectively with other charities to set out and share your vision for your local place.
- 2.** Look for opportunities to involve citizens in decision-making, focusing particularly on those who experience the greatest inequalities.
- 3.** Explore more collaborative commissioning approaches; build trust and relationships with aligned provider organisations to create the possibility of using less competitive approaches.
- 4.** Collect and share equalities data on workers and volunteers, plan to increase diversity at every level and share information transparently.
- 5.** Review operating model against the achievement of behaviour changes above and explore outcomes-based and collaborative commissioning models with commissioners.

20 Hannan, R. (2019) Radical Home Care: How self-management could save social care. [pdf]. The RSA. Available at [www.thersa.org/reports/social-care-radical](http://www.thersa.org/reports/social-care-radical) [accessed 15 January 2021].

21 Op cit. Think Local Act Personal (2017).

**SURVIVE  
THE  
PANDEMIC**

**WILL  
CHARITIES**

**Pre-pandemic, the charity sector had not yet engaged seriously enough with the existential threats it faces from the challenges it faces on multiple fronts: economic, political, technological and ethical. The escalating popularity of asset-based thinking could hasten the slide into irrelevance of charities which refuse to look more deeply at their values, behaviours and ways of working.**

**Meeting as equals: creating asset-based charities which have real impact**

## Will charities survive the pandemic?

It is possible to imagine a world with fewer charities: one in which people use technology to self-organise around causes and campaigns, in which they connect directly with each other when they want to seek or offer support, and in which large public service contracts are delivered by private sector organisations with varying degrees of corporate social responsibility, and other kinds of support are provided by self-employed workers linked with their clients through online marketplaces.

Our place in the public's hearts in the Covid-19 era is not a given. Our sector has been rocked by scandals in which some charities whose missions have been centred on equality and tackling oppression, have been found to be riddled with toxic, bullying or abusive cultures. The report *In Plain Sight* revealed the emotional harm caused to people who have experienced bullying in the charity workplace.<sup>22</sup> The report recommended improved systems and practice on governance, senior leadership and HR processes, as well better data on the extent of bullying, particularly amongst minority and oppressed groups, and a programme of sectoral cultural change.

These feel like symptoms of a wider societal problem around inequalities, with bullying commonplace amongst small charities too. How do we address these power imbalances and build more equal and inclusive staff and leadership cultures, in a sector where 92 percent of trustees and 91 percent of workers are white and 70 percent of chief executives at the country's largest charities are men?<sup>23</sup>

Pre-pandemic, the charity sector had not yet engaged seriously enough with the existential threats it faces from the challenges it faces on multiple fronts: economic, political, technological and ethical. The escalating popularity of asset-based thinking could hasten the slide into irrelevance of charities which refuse to look more deeply at their values, behaviours and ways of working. But asset-based thinking also offers a way for charities to rediscover their roots, their relevance and their unique role: bringing expertise, resources and convening power to longstanding as well as emerging societal challenges, and combining different kinds of value to create public services which are more human, effective and sustainable. Some charities will need to move further online. Some will need to find ways to scale down and network themselves more deeply into communities. Others may decide the time has come to reform themselves into civil rights movements. All could benefit from thinking with the people they seek to serve or represent about which of those options fits best.

- 22 Fitzpatrick, R. and Thorne, L. (2019) *In Plain Sight*. ACEVO and Centre for Mental Health. [pdf]. Available at: [www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/plain-sight](http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/plain-sight) [accessed 15 January 2021].
- 23 Charity Commission (2017) Charities must do more to promote diversity on their boards, new research shows. [online]. Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/news/charities-must-do-more-to-promote-diversity-on-their-boards-new-research-shows](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/charities-must-do-more-to-promote-diversity-on-their-boards-new-research-shows) [accessed 15 January 2021]; NCVO (2019) *Civil Society Almanac*. [online]. Available at: [www.blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2019/06/19/uk-civil-society-almanac-2019-the-latest-data-on-the-voluntary-sector-and-volunteering](http://www.blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2019/06/19/uk-civil-society-almanac-2019-the-latest-data-on-the-voluntary-sector-and-volunteering) [accessed 15 January 2021]; Preston, R. (2019) 70 per cent of CEOs at largest 100 charities are men. *Civil Society News*. [online]. Available at: [www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/70-per-cent-of-ceos-at-largest-100-charities-are-men.html](http://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/70-per-cent-of-ceos-at-largest-100-charities-are-men.html) [accessed 15 January 2021].

# **MAYDAY TRUST**

**During the pandemic, Mayday Trust shifted to an asset-based approach, radically transforming their way of working, with huge success.**

**I**n 2011 Mayday Trust was a £3m housing and support provider working with people experiencing homelessness and considering merging with a larger organisation to survive austerity. First, they decided to review their purpose through asking people what impact they thought homelessness services had had on their lives. These accounts became the Wisdom from the Street blogs, which identified two main problems with the services and system Mayday was part of: it was “at best dehumanising, embarrassing, at times re-traumatising and at worst institutionalising, trapping people in services” whose results weren’t good enough.<sup>24</sup> The problems lay in focusing on weakness, segregating people from day to day society and trying to ‘fix’ them. They realised the solutions were not to be found within the homelessness sector, but elsewhere, drawing on executive coaching, youth work and other fields, for a ‘strengths-based’ approach in which people would be in control of their lives and able to seek out the community resources which made most sense for them. “We made the pivotal decision then not to survive for survival’s sake and not to campaign to keep a system going that was clearly broken.”

Driving a person led, asset-based approach was radically transformative. Mayday Trust lost 50 percent of its staff team, keeping only those who were fully committed to the new way of working. They gave up contracts which did not fit the vision and invested £1.6m of their reserves, shrinking to focus on working with commissioners who were willing to vary their contract significantly. Mayday became alert to the fact that the current system removed people’s agency, power and control over their own lives, disconnecting them from their own abilities. Mayday’s mission changed from working to end homelessness to stopping the institutionalisation of people into services.

The approach that emerged was a response to listening to what people said, rather than drawing on existing evidenced-based interventions. They are sceptical of outcome-measuring, on the basis that organisations should not claim



responsibility for simple outcomes from complex situations: when people make changes in their lives those ‘outcomes’ belong to them. Success comes through building people’s resilience and motivation, rather than measuring ‘hard’ outcomes.

Dave agreed to meet up with a coach for a coffee to talk about his passion for remote controlled cars, not his drug use nor that he was living in a tent. Dave applied for a personal budget and got a car kit. That Christmas he went home to his family after 12 years. Within eight months he had accessed his own flat. Two years on, at a car rally, he met someone at BMW who encouraged him to apply, successfully, for his dream job. Over time Dave realised what was possible and he made it happen.

Personal transition service coaches aim to support people to “recognise and understand system barriers and failures and get connected with their own strengths and resources,” providing more opportunities to move out of services, and, like all the most inspiring charity work, facilitating both personal change and challenge to a dysfunctional system.

**Success comes through  
building people’s resilience  
and motivation**

<sup>24</sup> For more information on the blogs, see [www.maydaytrust.org.uk/wisdom-from-the-street-blogs](http://www.maydaytrust.org.uk/wisdom-from-the-street-blogs).

# ACTION PLAN

**What we need to do** to continue building the asset-based movement.



## Action plan

- 1** Begin a conversation with stakeholders and those currently poorly reached or excluded from the organisation, which starts with the 'good life' question and which drives strategy and service design.
- 2** Devolve responsibility to the most local level, using a network or partnership model which maximises the value added by both national and local organisations.
- 3** Invest in values-based recruitment and create outcome-focused roles in which workers can make decisions based primarily on what people (not organisations) want.
- 4** Audit equalities to identify the diversity of people working in and using the service; create a plan to tackle inequalities.
- 5** Large organisations should identify teams or local areas willing and able to act as pioneers and beacons for locally-led innovation, sharing learning and inspiration across the wider organisation.
- 6** Start-ups should plan for the level of scale which feels right for them and identify the core practices and values which will remain in place through scaling.
- 7** Adopt a user-led governance model and shared decision-making at every level
- 8** Create opportunities for a wider range of people to initiate and lead campaigns on the issues which matter most to them and diversify the range of voices speaking on the core mission.
- 9** Find ways for people at the grassroots to share in our resources, power and platforms.
- 10** Have open conversations about any tensions between service delivery and campaigning work, exploring operational or governance changes to resolve them.
- 11** Identify concentrations of unchecked power within the organisation; adopt anti-oppression and anti-bullying practices.
- 12** Move from responding to funding opportunities, towards offering high value services which reflect the charity's values and what citizens are asking for. Work collectively with other charities to set out and share your vision for your local place.
- 13** Look for opportunities to involve citizens in decision-making, focusing particularly on those who experience the greatest inequalities.
- 14** Explore more collaborative commissioning approaches; build trust and relationships with aligned provider organisations to create the possibility of using less competitive approaches.
- 15** Collect and share equalities data on workers and volunteers, plan to increase diversity at every level and share information transparently.
- 16** Review operating model against the achievement of behaviour changes above and explore outcomes-based and collaborative commissioning models with commissioners.

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8 John Adam Street  
London WC2N 6EZ  
+44 (0)20 7930 5115

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