

# PEOPLE NOT PROBLEMS: ASSET-BASED APPROACHES IN THE CHARITY SECTOR



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**Ruth Gripper and Patrick Murray**

NPC's recent [State of the Sector](#) research uncovered a growing interest from charities in models that concentrate on working with individual strengths and community networks to support communities to make change for themselves, rather than on directly fixing problems.

With charities increasingly interested in this area, we wanted to explore what an asset-based approach means for organisations, what it can offer the wider charity sector, and what the opportunities and pitfalls are. In December 2017, we convened a roundtable to explore the role of asset-based approaches in the charity sector.

- The roundtable addressed questions including:
- What does it mean to 'do' asset-based working?
- When can it add value?
- How does it affect individuals, communities, organisations and systems?
- How might asset-based working shape your organisation?

It was held under the Chatham House rule, so quotations here are unattributed. Below we share key insights from the discussion.

## About asset-based approaches

### Defining an asset-based approach

*'Asset-based enquiry tries to redress a balance between meeting needs or vulnerabilities, and nurturing strengths and resources in people and communities.'*

In short, an asset-based, or 'strength-based', approach focuses on 'what is strong' in an individual or a community. It then seeks to support them to mobilise, connect and build on those strengths to achieve their desired outcomes. This contrasts with the needs-based, or 'deficit', model, which starts from an analysis of a problem facing an individual or community and then seeks to provide a solution to fix it.

Taking an asset-based approach can encourage us to look beyond needs to see the whole person or community, and help them to uncover and build upon their strengths. Yet roundtable participants cautioned against presenting this as a binary choice and emphasised the need for a balance of asset-based provision alongside needs-based models.

## Conceptualising asset-based approaches

*'I ran hostels and rehabs, I found people housing, but did we ever talk to people about a good life? Not really.'*

The roundtable heard that it can be helpful to think of asset-based work at four levels:

**The fundamental vision of 'a good life'.** Aristotle argued for human flourishing as a practical target rather than a theoretical exercise—that philosophy could and should focus on what a good life is and how to go about creating it. Similarly, asset-based thinking starts with the vision and opportunity, the end goal of human flourishing, and considers how we work towards it. This corresponds to much asset-based thinking in the health and well-being sector.

**Working with individuals.** Strength-based practice prompts us to reconsider the language we use as well as our approach. For example, talking about 'a person experiencing homelessness' avoids defining a person by their current situation in the same way that the label 'homeless person' does. Relational development is an essential part of asset-based work with individuals—*working with* people, rather than *'doing to'* them. This corresponds to much asset-based work in the youth sector, among others.

**Working with communities.** Asset-based community development (ABCD) aims to harness hidden or otherwise unrealised assets within a community. This may be about uncovering those assets, linking them together and/or making better use of them. Time-banking, social prescribing and social action were highlighted as examples.

**Working with systems.** Asset-based thinking can also be applied when working systemically and structurally. For example, work on sustainable livelihoods—which originated in international development—has been applied in the UK. This helps us to think about the different types of capital within a community or person, how this relates to policy and systems, and what we need to invest in to make the greatest difference.

## How to make asset-based approaches work in practice

*'One of the hardest things is to relinquish power.'*

Many participants emphasised that moving to an asset-based approach had not been an easy or straightforward journey, but that it was worth it. There is no set formula or route-map: it requires organisations to commit to listening to their people they work with and adopt a reflexive learning approach. This can have far-reaching implications for how the charity is run. The key points are summarised below.

**Ask, don't tell.** Asset-based work requires asking and listening rather than telling people what your solution is. Participants posed the question of whether we know the barriers that individuals and communities face. We should then consider whether the charity and statutory sector's models of service help to address them, and ask what else we could do to support and help people to overcome these barriers.

**Relinquish power.** Genuine asset-based work requires organisations to give up some of their power and re-start their relationship with each individual or community, following wherever that conversation leads. This means being ready to respond when people's responses challenge your current work or approach. Doing so requires a shift for all involved in the organisation; participants warned it may also be greeted with scepticism by clients or other stakeholders if they have previously been used to you working in a different way.

**Meet people where they are.** As one participant said, *'When you hold a meeting, you invite a certain kind of person to that—a person who goes to meetings.'* To work with the whole community you need to meet people where they are, so think of alternative ways to engage: go to their building or neighbourhood, hold a curry night, a ceilidh or similar and make the conversation part of that.

*'We're not really sure where it's going to go, but if you take the risk, if you hand over the power, you can do something differently.'*

**It feels risky.** uncertainty and risk came up repeatedly throughout the discussion. Because asset-based work asks, it doesn't tell, because it is relational rather than programmatic, and because it responds to the person, outcomes are uncertain—you simply do not know where it will lead. One participant described an asset-based initiative they were involved with where, one year in, they had little concrete to show for it. Now, though, early investment in relationships and developing a shared language is starting to bear fruit. For a sector (and perhaps particularly for funders and commissioners) accustomed to working to defined outputs and outcomes, this can feel uncomfortable.

*'It's not for the faint-hearted. You need to be willing to change and challenge your own thinking as well as that of the organisation or those you work with.'*

**Embrace wholesale change.** Many participants talked about asset-based work as a journey their organisation and its staff were on. Some were part-way through that journey, with asset-based and needs-based service models co-existing within the organisation. This is creating internal debate and posing some challenges to traditional delivery, but it remains to be seen how it will play out within the organisation.

There was a view—widely but not uniformly shared—that asset-based work was all or nothing: it is not possible to do it just a bit or to tinker around the edges. Rather, it had to inform everything that you do. Speakers talked about efforts that had been unsuccessful because *'we didn't follow it through'*. They highlighted the change asset-based working had required of their staff, their policies and procedures, their impact measurement, their organisational culture and financial model.

*'You have to turn the tables over. You can't do it slightly, you can't just rewrite the paperwork. You have to get people who believe in it to come and work for you, because if you don't have the right people it's not going to happen.'*

**Get the right people.** a different approach requires developing or introducing a different skill-set and for many participants this had led them to adjust their recruitment and performance management processes, as well as the policies and procedures in place to support a different way of working. Others talked about: the wider culture change involved; the need to bring staff with you in making the shift to a different way of working; the demands it places on staff; and the support and emotional care necessary for those doing asset-based, relational work.

**Show results quickly.** Asset-based working, and the uncertainty it necessarily entails, requires a different approach to success and failure. Participants called on organisations to celebrate and talk about success quickly, but also to be prepared to fail and iterate.

## Points of discussion and debate

The discussion highlighted common themes that organisations and practitioners working in this way are grappling with. Participants had different perspectives on how best to respond to these challenges.

### How—and whether—to scale the approach

*'If you're going to do something like this it has to have the culture that comes with it.'*

For some participants, asset-based working is grass-roots by its very nature. They feared that trying to scale the approach, or institutionalise it, risked undermining the relational dimension that makes asset-based working

effective. Others, however, were keen to spread the approach—and realised that they would not be able to do so on their own.

Different organisations are using different tactics: one had chosen to partner with other delivery organisations that commit to working in this way, with an accreditation process and quality framework to ensure that it is being faithfully applied. Others were working with front-line public sector staff to support them to work in this way.

## Working inside or outside the system

*‘You cannot deliver asset-based work within a deficit-based framework.’*

One of the main points of contention during the roundtable was about how to affect change within the wider system. Those who were taking an asset-based approach found themselves *‘bumping up against’* other service delivery organisations, statutory services, commissioners and funders whose practice and models were project-focused and largely based on a deficit model.

This prompted one of two responses: to work with the system and try to change it, or to ignore the system altogether. Either option has implications. For those working within the system, the advice was to find allies and work with them. This could be *‘enlightened commissioners’* who are prepared to offer a funding model that works for your approach. Or it could be public sector agencies who are open to working with you on the ground. We heard examples of the latter approach both where smaller, local organisations had good relationships with their local authority, and where larger national organisations were working with large numbers of government agency staff.

Others had a very different perspective—that any kind of relationship with the state was problematic, and statutory funding in particular a problem. Their response was to avoid commissioners and to attempt to work outside the system, with *‘funders who get it’* and where there was space for them to work in the way that they wanted to.

*‘Systems and services assume there are more important matters, so they forget to ask the big questions.’*

Whichever approach you take, you need to understand the context in which you are working, your role in the wider system and how it fits with other organisations. Asset-based work does not solve all problems: crisis support and services that meet people’s immediate needs will still be necessary. Roundtable participants agreed that as a single organisation you do not need to do both—indeed, that they may require different skills and ways of working—but that it is important to consider the role your organisation plays within the wider system. Who is providing that safety net if not you? How do you interact with and relate to them? Participants highlighted that there is a risk that, in the context of austerity, asset-based approaches are used to plug gaps left by the state.

Voluntary sector funding and commissioning was a theme throughout the conversation. Asset-based work poses challenges not only for the organisations that practice this approach but also to those that fund or commission it. These need to be prepared to give up control and certainty over outcomes. Where there is a mutual commitment to trying new approaches, asset-based work can enable both to achieve their shared goal of improving lives. If they are prepared to do so, funders can also play an important role in supporting leadership development and the spaces for people and organisations to come together and work in this way.

## Impact measurement and building an evidence base

*‘Our outcomes are still quite traditional outcomes, because when we spoke to people that is what they want: they want a job, they want a home, they want to contribute.’*

How to measure and evidence impact was identified as a challenge by many participants, particularly given that the nature of asset-based working means that outcomes are uncertain. That does not make it impossible, however. They were clear that the outcomes they are achieving were better for the people and communities they were working with. One organisation talked about the developmental assets tool they use, based on an existing tool used in the USA. They have found that the people they work with are using it for themselves, too.

For an approach based on developing relationships and listening to people, it is unsurprising that qualitative research plays an important role in impact measurement—with an emphasis on stories and natural opportunities for feedback rather than surveys. Participants were conscious of how those stories are framed and the question of *‘who owns the story’* and how that story is told. That means making sure that their approach to evidence and impact has integrity and fits with the values of their way of working.

## Future directions—and a challenge to the sector

*‘It’s very hard when you don’t know where you’re going, what it will look like or what the outcomes will be; it’s much easier when you’ve got a roadmap. This is really disrupting our model of work, and that feels very good.’*

The roundtable discussion closed with a challenge to those present, and others interested in asset-based working, to reflect on their own practice. Asset-based approaches are relational—but to what extent do organisations taking this approach really develop relationships and work with *each other*? One participant described work they were involved in bringing local charities together to take an asset-based approach to community development; they had never met before, despite their close geographical proximity.

NPC convened this roundtable to explore how asset-based work is being applied and what it can offer the wider sector. Participants highlighted the benefits it can bring to individuals, communities, and wider society, as well as the organisations working with them—more meaningful outcomes and, hopefully, lasting change. For those working in this way it had prompted them to look afresh at their organisational culture, the system they were working in and their relationship with funders and the state. Organisations around the table were at different stages on this journey: some were applying it in areas of their work, while others had seen far-reaching change both within their own organisation and the way they worked within the system. For all of them, it had started with a desire to try doing things differently, and to listen to what ‘a good life’ really means for the people using their services.

## Further reading

Three essays from our State of the Sector essay collection [Flipping the narrative](#) discuss this further:

- [Our work must be person-led, not systems-led](#), Pat McArdle, Mayday Trust
- [To tackle the country’s divisions, we must start locally](#), Clare Thomas, London’s Giving
- [Healthy disagreement can help change broken systems](#), Maff Potts and Charlie Howard

Thank you to everyone who attended and contributed to the roundtable. If you have any comments, get in touch via [info@thinkNPC.org](mailto:info@thinkNPC.org) or via Twitter at [@NPCthinks](#).

## TRANSFORMING THE CHARITY SECTOR

NPC is a charity think tank and consultancy. Over the past 15 years we have worked with charities, funders, philanthropists and others, supporting them to deliver the greatest possible impact for the causes and beneficiaries they exist to serve.

NPC occupies a unique position at the nexus between charities and funders. We are driven by the values and mission of the charity sector, to which we bring the rigour, clarity and analysis needed to better achieve the outcomes we all seek. We also share the motivations and passion of funders, to which we bring our expertise, experience and track record of success.

**Increasing the impact of charities:** NPC exists to make charities and social enterprises more successful in achieving their missions. Through rigorous analysis, practical advice and innovative thinking, we make charities' money and energy go further, and help them to achieve the greatest impact.

**Increasing the impact of funders:** NPC's role is to make funders more successful too. We share the passion funders have for helping charities and changing people's lives. We understand their motivations and their objectives, and we know that giving is more rewarding if it achieves the greatest impact it can.

**Strengthening the partnership between charities and funders:** NPC's mission is also to bring the two sides of the funding equation together, improving understanding and enhancing their combined impact. We can help funders and those they fund to connect and transform the way they work together to achieve their vision.

**New Philanthropy Capital**  
185 Park Street, London SE1 9BL  
020 7620 4850  
[info@thinkNPC.org](mailto:info@thinkNPC.org)  
[@NPCthinks](https://www.thinkNPC.org)

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