



**Building Bridges to a Good Life**  
**A review of asset based, person centred**  
**approaches and people with learning**  
**disabilities in Scotland**

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## Foreword



The Scottish Government wants to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities. This report is one of a series commissioned by the Scottish Commission for Learning Disability on behalf of the Scottish Government to understand how we can achieve that ambition.

Scotland's learning disability strategy, The keys to life, seeks to improve the quality of life for people with learning disabilities so that they live longer healthier lives, participate fully in all aspects of society and prosper as individuals.

People with learning disabilities need greater choice and control and the opportunity to lead independent lives and be active citizens.

This vision echoes one of the key priorities in the Christie Commission's report on the future delivery of public services.

Working closely with individuals and communities to understand their needs, maximise talents and resources, support self-reliance, and build resilience

This is what taking an asset based approach means. Too often in the past an emphasis on the inequalities experienced by people with learning disabilities has had the unintended consequence of focusing on deficits rather than assets.

Deficits are real and can't be wished away. But it is by focusing on the assets of individuals, families and communities that we can support people with learning disabilities to realise their true potential.

We hope that this report can help us make that happen.

**Chris Creegan**

Chief Executive, SCLD

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Creegan".

## Preface by Cormac Russell

The essence of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) message is that people, regardless of their labels, want a life not a service so that they can experience the sweet taste of unforced and unpaid acceptance. Moreover, it is clear that, such acceptance is found beyond institutions and in interconnected/interdependence in community life. Sadly, interdependence is not the norm for many, even for those living independently in neighbourhoods. The question in our work (Nurture Development) has therefore become less about person-centred planning in its own right and more about growing hospitable communities from inside out, with person-centred practice embedded in the effort alongside community building. We are interested in building a culture of inclusion at a neighbourhood scale, and moving beyond a siloed approach that focuses almost exclusively on people with a learning disability.

One of the greatest challenges in working with communities and agencies is in supporting the growth of hospitality that is 'of' the people (involving the gifts of all people). Still much of the community development practices in relation to 'disability' that we see on the ground continues to be done 'to', 'for', or 'with' people, and very little is done in a truly citizen led way.

Below is a table, originally developed by Dan Duncan and subsequently further developed by me, which begins to set out the very real difference between an ABCD approach and a traditional deficit approach.

In Scotland, some continue to assume that ABCD is just a different way of delivering services. Some see it as a cheaper way to do so, while others are drawn to the ideology of helping people do things for themselves and each other. I am firmly of the belief that we should be coming alongside those who are committed to growing inclusion from inside out and in a total place-based way. This, to my mind, is the next chapter in the ABCD story in Scotland, and it will require stewardship and investment from all single issue groups for whom community building is an essential element in their change journey.

	Needs/Deficit-Based	Asset-Based
<b>Purpose</b>	Charging community through increased services.	Changing community through citizen involvement.
<b>Method</b>	Institutional reform = better programmes	Citizen-centered production=more independence.
<b>Accountability</b>	Leaders are professional staff. Accountable to institutional stakeholders.	Leaders are widely circles of citizens action and participation. Accountable to the community.
<b>Significance of assets</b>	Assets are system inputs. Asset mapping is data collection.	Assets are anything that builds community relationships between people, their ecology and the local economy to be discovered and connected. Asset mapping is self realisation and relational leadership development.
<b>Production resource</b>	Money is the key resource. Falls apart without money.	Relationships are the key resource. Falls apart when money becomes the focus.
<b>Operating challenge</b>	How do we get citizens involved?	How do we, 'the local community', channel and build on all this citizen participation?
<b>System dynamic</b>	Tends to spread itself thinner over time.	Tends to snowball over time.
<b>Evaluation</b>	Success is service outcomes, measured mostly by institutional stakeholders.	Success is capacity, measured mostly by relationships.
<b>Development</b>	Money, programmes (high cost inputs), are invested with the expectation that development outputs will emerge.	Community building enables appropriate external investment.

ABCD is about the good life, it is not about services; it is about community building. In practice, this means the learning disability movement in Scotland advocating for a number of quite significant shifts in the way that the inclusion movement may be going:

1. Recognise that the pursuit of clients and the pursuit of citizens are competing enterprises. Much of the practice I see in Scotland revolves around the relationship between clients and services. The progressives are trying to use their institutional resources to narrow the gap between people's dreams for their lives and activities in the community, but few are actually supporting the community to receive that person's gifts.
2. Recognise that for the most part no real resource is going into working in a place-based way. For the most part, current supports revolve around the person and their view of a good life, as they should, but this only addresses one side of the challenge: the need and right for a person to have a life of their own choosing. The other side of the challenge is that to have those needs for belonging met, there needs to be a community there to receive their gifts. There is a real danger unless the community building work is done at this (street) level, we could be building bridges into 'nowhere', or the 'usual', set of activities. Of course person-centred work and circles work is of central importance, as are projects such as Keyring, and Community Catalyst, but I contend the missing link is place-based community building. If the learning disability movement joined with other movements to advocate for a place-based approach across Scotland, the impact would be transformational.

Being ready to use your organisational resources to build community, instead of institutional prowess, client numbers, or revenue, involves making visible, through action, at least five commitments:

1. Exclusively focus on development not relief. If the development is done well and from inside out, then positive, enduring and proportionate relief will follow.
2. Be values heavy and issues light inside and outside your organisation. Start by valuing the gifts of your employees and they will value the gifts of the people they serve.
3. Organise your systems the way people organise their lives; do not expect people to organise their lives the way you organise your systems. Make your focus the reduction of dependency on systems and programmes in preference for the increase of interdependency in community life outside of 'service-land'.
4. Bringing people together across difference in ways and places that support them to build dense and enduring places of welcome and collective efficacy.
5. Be clear about what you are not going to do to be helpful. In other words, believe that ordinary people organised collectively are the best inventors of a better future. Therefore, be curious as to how you can serve and support that invention, not be a proxy for it; learn to lead by stepping back.

This orientation will reduce staff burnout, increase relevance and contribution to community life and citizenship. If you fit those five ways to organisational wellbeing you are, in effect most likely, supporting ABCD, even if you do not use the jargon.

More importantly, you are acting as an acolyte to community building endeavours and priorities, and not as the high priests of a passive flock. Alongside active citizens in local communities, civic professionals who uphold these practices are co-creating and enlarging citizen-centred democracy, and consequentially stemming the tide of technocracy that drowns it.

Shifting in this direction is going to demand a significant process of development within organisations, but also in families and across society in general.

In concluding this short reflection, I would say, that despite the challenges, there is real cause for hope that in Scotland the balance between the provision of person-centred care and community building will be struck, and that more people will be celebrated for their gifts, and experience the sweet taste of unforced and unpaid acceptance.

## 1. Introduction

The last decade has seen a growing recognition of the rights of people with learning disabilities to enjoy a 'good life' with choice about what that means to them and control over how they live it. There has been a move away from providing services to and for people, towards people deciding for themselves how they want to live and having control over the resources they need.

During the same period, at community level, there has been growing interest in place-based development underpinned by asset based principles: moving away from seeing areas in terms of their needs and deficits towards viewing communities and people who live in them as resources, capable of creating their own solutions and opportunities.

On the face of it, there seems to be much in common between these two agendas. Both emphasise control, choice and a transfer of power from those who have traditionally made decisions about people's lives and communities to people and communities themselves. So is there potential to join up the thinking about choice and control for people with learning disability with principles of asset based working? This report considers that question.

### 1.1. Purpose of the review

This review was commissioned to consider the efficacy of asset based approaches for people with learning disabilities and to evidence the impact these approaches can have on people's lives.

The specific objectives were:

- To clarify the definitions and core principles of asset based approaches.
- To review the evidence for such approaches and how they may be applied to people with learning disabilities.
- To identify and engage with those practicing asset based approaches in Scotland in relation to learning disability.
- To produce a map of asset based practice approaches in Scotland.
- To identify good practice from a range of perspectives, including qualitative input from people with lived experience of learning disability.
- To provide an overall assessment of the efficacy of this approach with this population including a summary of gaps and challenges.
- To highlight policy and practice implications, particularly for the learning disability strategy, its implementation framework and any cross policy benefits.

### 1.2. Carrying out the review

Our approach has combined the following elements of work:

#### a) A desk based review of current evidence, policy and practice

We started with a review of what is known about asset based approaches and their application to learning disabilities based on a search of current literature, including 'grey' policy and practice literature. The purpose of this was to:

- Identify current definitions and underlying principles of asset based approaches.
- Scope the extent to which these have been applied to learning disabilities.
- Identify and review any evaluations of these approaches.
- Identify any accounts of how these have been implemented in practice and any potential learning that can be derived from these.

### **b) Key informant interviews**

We have conducted 40 interviews with a range of informants, starting with people well known in the field of asset based working and extending to individuals and organisations identified as applying these approaches to learning disabilities in Scotland. We generated an initial list in conjunction with the Scottish Commission for Learning Disability (SCLD) and then used a 'snowballing' approach to identify a wider range of informants. We were greatly assisted by the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) who circulated our call for information via the Co-production Network and each person we interviewed was asked to identify others they thought might be working in this way. We made contact by email and the majority of interviews were conducted by phone. These interviews were used to:

- Gather intelligence on the current use of asset based approaches, working definitions and underlying principles.
- Obtain views on how these approaches may be or are being applied to learning disabilities.
- Identify any examples of projects believed to be applying asset based working and involving people with learning disabilities.
- Obtain people's views on the impact of such work.

In addition to talking to people about their work, we also gathered relevant documentation from projects describing what they do, how their approaches have been implemented and any formal or informal evaluation or feedback they have obtained. We also reviewed the websites of relevant organisations to collate further information.

### **c) A consultation workshop**

A consultation workshop was held involving some of the organisations identified through the key informant interviews as working in asset based ways with people with learning disabilities. Ten people participated in this workshop in order to:

- Share the principles underpinning asset based working for people with learning disabilities.
- Discuss the connections between asset based approaches and related ways of working, such as local area co-ordination.
- Share any examples of such approaches being implemented in practice – including examples which have not previously been 'branded' as asset based approaches but which are consistent with their principles.

- Share learning and perspectives on the potential benefits of these approaches and any challenges anticipated.
- Share perspectives from a range of stakeholders including people with learning disabilities themselves.

#### **d) Mapping asset based approaches with people with learning disabilities across Scotland**

All the above elements of work have contributed to identifying and understanding asset based approaches involving people with learning disabilities across Scotland. In developing the mapping, we sought to capture examples of projects applying the principles of asset based working; including those who do not necessarily use the terminology 'asset based'. The purpose of this mapping was to:

- Provide information on the extent to which asset based approaches are being implemented, how and where.
- Identify any 'hot spots' where asset based approaches appear to be getting embedded and 'cold spots' where these approaches appear to be absent.
- Identify the range of approaches including those working primarily with individuals, with groups and with the wider community.
- Identify potential examples of good practice to describe in more detail as case studies.

### 1.3. Our hypothesis

The discourse of asset based approaches has its origins in community development. The terminology of asset based working is less common in the learning disability field. Indeed, our literature review found almost no reference to people with learning disabilities in written descriptions of asset based projects and we did not find any accounts of projects with learning disabilities as the main focus. That does not mean that people with learning disabilities have not been involved in these community based projects; it is just that we do not know whether that is the case from existing literature.

We therefore approached this review with two ‘hypotheses’:

1. Some place-based initiatives using an asset based approach will involve people with learning disabilities as members of their local communities; but there are likely to be challenges in identifying them because neighbourhood projects may not collect information about the people involved.
2. Some learning disability focused initiatives will be using asset based approaches; but there are likely to be challenges in identifying them because learning disability projects may not use the language of ‘assets’ to describe what they do.

We therefore decided to seek examples from both the broader community development field as well as from specialist learning disability organisations; and we also spoke to people whose work includes people with learning disabilities alongside others. Narrowing the focus to just learning disability organisations would, in our view, have missed the point. But the broader focus brought challenges due to the sheer number of potentially relevant sources of information; which brings us on to the limitations of this work.

### 1.4. Limitations of this review

This review was carried out within a tight timescale between November 2015 and March 2016. During that period, we identified a substantial number of initiatives that could be described as ‘asset based’ which are incorporated into our mapping. However, in the time available we were unable to be entirely comprehensive in our approach and we will inevitably have missed some excellent examples. Given the rapidly changing context of learning disabilities in Scotland there will also be new initiatives emerging all the time; as well as some that are getting lost due to funding changes. This review should therefore be viewed as just one contribution to the debate about asset based approaches and people with learning disabilities, and the mapping as one source of information about how these are being implemented in some areas.

## 2. What do we mean by asset based approaches?

Asset based approaches originated in the field of community development, initially in the United States (Kramer, Amos et al.2012) and offer a positive way of thinking about and responding to communities, especially those traditionally labelled as deprived, disadvantaged or challenging. Instead of being preoccupied by deficits, needs and difficulties, an asset based approach focuses on strengths and capacities. In his preface to this review, Cormac Russell sets out the key differences between asset based

approaches and deficit based models (see page 5).

In recent years, the assets discourse has been influencing thinking in Scotland, not only about community development specifically, but also in relation to health and public sector reforms (Friedli 2013; Glasgow Centre for Population Health 2013; Health Foundation 2015).

There is a distinction to be made between asset based community development (ABCD) and what can be broadly termed asset based approaches. Asset based community development is a distinct place-based approach pioneered by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) and associated with a number of associated tools and methods (such as asset mapping). The term 'asset based approaches' encompasses quite a broad range of different ways of working - with individuals, groups and organisations as well as neighbourhoods.

It is this broader understanding that this paper focusses on.

## 2.1. Definitions and principles of asset based approaches

There are a number of definitions of asset based approaches such as this one provided by NHS Scotland (2011:2):

*“An asset-based approach is one which seeks positively to mobilise the assets, capacities or resources available to individuals and communities which could enable them to gain more control over their lives and circumstances.”*

On their website, the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC: 2015) describe asset based approaches as:

*“...concerned with facilitating people and communities to come together to achieve positive change using their own knowledge, skills and lived experience of the issues they encounter in their own lives. They recognise that positive health and social outcomes will not be achieved by maintaining a 'doing to' culture, and recognise that meaningful social change will only occur when people and communities have the opportunities and facility to control and manage their own futures. In community development terms, assets based approaches recognise and build on a combination of the human, social and physical capital that exists within local communities.”*

Although there are these broad definitions of asset based approaches, from our review of literature and discussions with key informants, it has become clear that there is no one single model. Advocates of such approaches are clear that there is no 'off the shelf' set of practices that can be adopted; rather, they emphasise the importance of values and principles. As one of our informants pointed out:

*“Asset based approaches are forms of engagement and relationship building that enable strengths, capacities and abilities to be identified and developed for positive outcomes, and therefore by recognising the value and contribution that individual people have to offer, these principles can be applied in any setting. But even the term 'approach' is a bit of a misnomer - it implies that there's an off the shelf model when it's more about the way people work together - it's values based and should be relevant to everyone including people with learning*

*disabilities. There's a spectrum of activity so people may be doing some of it but not all of it – but there should be a golden thread of values.*

*People have tried to create something called a 'model' when it hasn't been a model. A whole range of approaches can be called asset based or apply some of the principles. The key elements are that they are bottom up – citizen led and they focus on the gifts that people bring rather than their vulnerabilities."*

Most examples of asset based working that can be found in the literature derived from the community development field and are therefore 'place-based'; focused on a particular community or neighbourhood. However, there are also definitions which suggest that the principles of asset based approaches can be applied not only to neighbourhoods, but to groups of people, communities of interest, and to individuals. For example, a recent report from the Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2015:15) sums up asset based approaches as follows:

*"Essentially, asset based approaches are about recognising and making the most of people's strengths. To do so requires a shift in focus from defining people in terms of what they do not have (their needs) to what they do (their assets). This way of working is also about acknowledging that communities and individuals often labelled deprived may be rich in relationships, resourcefulness and social and personal assets. Working in an asset based way enables people to become better connected with each other and encourages a spirit of co-operation, mutual support and caring for one another so that people can be in control of their lives. As confidence and self-esteem grow in individuals and neighbours, trust, support and community cohesion are built."*

Several writers have provided sets of principles for asset based approaches. In the UK, these often derive from the work of Foot and Hopkins (2010), as below:

### **Principles of asset based approaches**

- Instead of starting with the problems, start with what is working and what people care about.
- Working with people – “doing with”, rather than “doing to”.
- Helping people to identify and focus the assets and strengths within themselves and their communities, supporting them to make sustainable improvements in their lives.
- Supporting people to make changes for the better by enhancing skills for resilience, relationships, knowledge and self-esteem.
- Support for building mutually supportive networks which help people make sense of their environments and take control of their lives.
- Shifting control over the design/development of actions from the state to individual and communities.

### 3. The policy and practice context for asset based approaches in Scotland

There are a number of policy drivers which are contributing to asset based approaches becoming increasingly popular. These include the following:

#### 3.1. Public and community empowerment

There is a general policy drive towards greater public and community empowerment. This is linked to a growing recognition that, in many respects, traditional approaches to public services and initiatives to regenerate communities have been slow to deliver changes in health and social inequalities. These concerns were considered by the Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services which published its report in June 2011. A key theme in the Christie report was the reality of financial austerity and the need to do things differently within ever tighter budgets. A central message was that policy makers and planners needed both to do things better and do things more efficiently. Harnessing the capacities of communities was one means of doing this and although the Christie report did not specifically use the term 'asset based', many of its recommendations for system reform were consistent with asset based principles. For example, the review suggested that more positive approaches to public services reflect the following features:

- They are grounded in people's lives; helping them contribute socially and economically and to be whom they want to be.
- Communities and services work together to decide what needs to be done, and how it is going to be done; so that services fit people's needs, rather than the other way round.
- Best use is made of all the resources available, building the capacity of all those involved.
- They take a long-term view, anticipating and preventing problems wherever possible; saving human and financial costs over the longer term.
- Front-line staff seek solutions actively with a 'can-do' attitude, empowered by managers and leaders.
- The essential authority of people and their communities is acknowledged.

The similarities between the above features as recommended by Christie and the principles of asset based working are quite striking.

More recently, the Community Empowerment Act, 2015 aims to empower community bodies through the ownership of physical assets in the community (land and buildings), and by strengthening their voices in decisions about public services. Provisions of particular relevance include:

- A requirement for the Scottish Government to consult on, develop and publish a set of national outcomes and to publicly report progress towards these.
- Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) are placed on a statutory footing and are given a duty to involve community bodies at all stages of community planning. Tackling inequalities will be a specific focus, and CPPs will have to produce

'locality plans' at a more local level for areas experiencing particular disadvantage.

- The Act provides a mechanism for community bodies to put forward their ideas for how services could be changed to improve outcomes for their community. This could include community bodies taking on delivery of services.
- Ministers are given the power to require Scottish public authorities to promote and facilitate the participation of members of the public in the decisions and activities of the authority, including in the allocation of its resources.

The overall direction of policy is therefore hard to ignore: the emphasis is on active public and community involvement at both national and local level and the identification and harnessing of community assets.

### 3.2. Policy and practice developments for people with learning disabilities

In parallel to these broader policy drivers, there have been a number of related developments more specific to people with disabilities and/or health conditions (these include older people and people with physical and mental health conditions as well as people with learning disabilities). Following de-institutionalisation, there has been a gradual shift in emphasis away from what services people need, towards what kind of life they want. For many years now, choice and control have been central tenets of the **personalisation agenda**. Personalised budgets, Person Centred Planning and Self-Directed Support all have ambitions, principles and values that are similar to those of asset based working (Duffy 2012). These approaches have been promoted by the government ( Scottish Executive 2012, and The Scottish Government 2013) and by disabled people themselves (Power, Lord et al. 2013) as ways of achieving greater inclusion and equality.

Currently, **Self-Directed Support** is high on the policy agenda. This is based on the premise that everyone should be in control of their own life and that some people need support to lead an independent life and advocacy to be empowered to make important decisions. The Social Care Self-Directed Support Act, 2013 came into force in 2014 and places a duty on local authority social work departments to offer people who are eligible for social care, a range of choices over how they receive their support. Self-Directed Support allows people, their carers and their families to make informed choices on what their support looks like and how it is delivered, making it possible to meet agreed personal outcomes.

However, one of the criticisms of personalisation – or at least of how it is sometimes implemented – is that it can place the focus on the individual without sufficient consideration of their place in their wider community. An approach which seeks to address this is **Local Area Co-ordination (LAC)** which offers a means of strengthening the links that people with learning disabilities have with their community, and for stimulating the development of relevant asset based projects (SCLD 2010, Broad 2012). The model of LAC originated in Australia and has been adopted in many parts of Scotland to facilitate community integration of people with learning disabilities. Although there is no single approach to LAC in Scotland, co-ordinators generally work

on two fronts: they support communities to be more welcoming and inclusive; and support people with learning disabilities and their families to be better connected. The hope is that people can enjoy meaningful lives in welcoming communities.

The importance of community connectedness for people with learning disabilities is reinforced by The keys to life, Scotland's learning disability strategy (The Scottish Government 2013). The keys to life is based on a commitment to human rights for people with learning disabilities, has a strong focus on tackling the significant health inequalities faced by people with learning disabilities and includes many other measures to improve the quality of their lives. The implementation framework has four strategic outcomes which relate to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. These are:

- A Healthy Life: People with learning disabilities enjoy the highest attainable standard of living, health and family life.
- Choice and Control: People with learning disabilities are treated with dignity and respect, and protected from neglect, exploitation and abuse.
- Independence: People with learning disabilities are able to live independently in the community with equal access to all aspects of society.
- Active Citizenship: People with learning disabilities are able to participate in all aspects of community and society.

This review of asset based working is one of the priority actions arising from the Active Citizenship strategic outcome.

### 3.3. The lives of people with learning disabilities in Scotland

It is worth pausing here to offer a reminder about important characteristics of the lives of the people who are at the heart of this review. A report from SCLD (2015) provides a broad overview of the 26,786 adults (0.6% of the total population) with learning disabilities who were known to local authorities in Scotland in 2014. Findings that are relevant in this context are summarised below:

#### Basic facts 2015

- 15% of people with learning disabilities also have an autism diagnosis;
- 58% of adults with learning disabilities have a Personal Life Plan;
- 6% of adults were in employment;
- Only 10% of people had used a local area co-ordination (LAC) service.

Where adults with learning disabilities were living:

- Over half of adults with learning disabilities live in the 40% most deprived areas in Scotland.
- 61% live in mainstream accommodation; 35% with a family carer:
  - 21% receive further support;
  - 27% live without further support;
  - 13% this data was missing.

It is clear from these statistics that progress has been made for people with learning disabilities. For example, people are no longer segregated in long stay hospitals. However, for most people, citizenship, equality, independence, and exercising choice and control over their lives is still a long way off.

Do asset based approaches offer a way forward?

## 4. An overview of the literature

We carried out a search to identify published literature in this field, including relevant international literature. Web searches were carried out to identify 'grey' policy and practice literature. Key word searches were carried out on relevant academic databases (psycARTICLES, PsycINFO and Social Science Citation Index). The term 'asset based approach' was combined with the following terms: 'learning disability' or 'learning difficulty' or 'intellectual disability'; plus 'Scotland'; 'vulnerable'; 'critique'; 'review'; 'personalisation'; and 'inequality'. However, the search strategy was not entirely restricted to these terms; we followed other leads as appeared relevant.

## 4.1. Characteristics of the literature

The literature has some striking characteristics:

- As yet there is no literature in peer reviewed journals exploring the relevance of the asset based approach to people with learning disabilities.
- There is extensive grey literature on asset based approaches and it appears to be beginning to inform thinking and practice with people with learning disabilities. This includes encouragement to use this approach, statements of intent (The Scottish Government 2013), and a small number of relevant project evaluations e.g. (Boelman and Russell, 2013) and reviews of asset related developments (Foot 2012, McLean and McNeice 2012).
- The language used throughout the literature, in policy papers and supporting case studies, is persuasive, encouraging, and often heartfelt. The narrative is consistently positive.
- In terms of evaluation, there is widespread agreement that this is a complex area in which to prove the efficacy of an intervention especially when projects are of short duration (NHS Health Scotland 2011), and when insufficient resources have been allocated to measurement and evaluation (McLean and McNeice, 2012). There is also a general acknowledgement that many traditional approaches to evaluation do not lend themselves to assessing the impact of asset based working (Foot 2012)
- As yet, there is no published evidence to show that the assets approach, and collaborative work with communities, can prevent or undo the main avoidable causes of ill-health (NHS Health Scotland 2011, Friedli 2013) or address the health inequalities experienced by people with learning disabilities.
- The assets approach has attracted very little critical attention. These are the main critiques that feature in the literature so far:
  - The assumption that the community is a geographical entity ‘that houses a group of like-minded individuals who share values, norms and a desire for generative development’ (Kramer, Amos et al. 2012: 542), ignores the existence of divergent and conflicting interests that also exist within communities, and the challenges of building relationships between people with learning disabilities and their neighbours (Van Alphen, Dijker et al. 2010).
  - The asset approach can be used to provide a rationale for cuts to social welfare which could further erode the responsibilities of the state (Allmark, Bhanbhro et al. 2014, MacLeod and Emejulu 2014).
  - The focus on ‘assets’ diverts attention away from deprivations and difficulties in people’s lives that should be the focus of social action (MacLeod and Emejulu 2014).

## 4.2. Characteristics of projects

From our review of the literature, projects describing themselves as asset based seem to have a number of common features:

- The majority of asset based projects originate in the voluntary sector, are often initiated by a highly motivated person, and grow from a need or issue that captures the support and involvement of others in the community (Foot 2012, McLean and McNeice 2012, Boelman and Russell 2013).
- Project development tends to be driven by reflection on what works or does not work in practice rather than formal monitoring and evaluation; there is reliance on rich anecdotal feedback from participants (Boelman and Russell 2013).
- Descriptive data suggest that people value being part of asset based projects which have the potential to broaden a person's network and opportunities, and to have a positive impact on their identity and self-esteem (Emerson and Baines 2010, McLean and McNeice 2012).
- Funding support for asset type projects is often hard to secure (and usually short-term) and when the financial foundations are weak this is distracting and unsettling for the people involved (McLean and McNeice 2012).
- Translating lessons from assets type projects to mainstream provision is recognised as a huge organisational challenge (GCPH2013).
- There are no projects described in the literature which have people with learning disabilities as the primary focus. There is a small number (McLean and McNeice 2012, Boelman and Russell 2013) which mention that people with learning disabilities are amongst those participating in their project and which provide case material that illustrates this point. However, these descriptions are not accompanied by further discussion and analysis.

## 4.3. Asset based approaches in the context of learning disabilities

As we noted earlier in this report, the terminology of asset based approaches is less commonly used in the learning disability field. However, there are established approaches with people with learning disabilities which are based on some similar principles, have potential to be built upon in developing asset based thinking and which may have transferable lessons for such development. The main ones are personalisation and local area co-ordination, but it is important not to forget the long history of self-advocacy involving people with learning disabilities.

### • Personalisation agenda

There are a number of initiatives which can be seen as fitting within the personalisation agenda such as Person Centred Planning (PCP) and Self-Directed Support (SDS). There is evidence that these can result in demonstrable improvements in the life experiences of people with learning disabilities. To illustrate, an evaluation by Robertson et al. (2005) found that Person Centred Planning (PCP) resulted in a 52% increase in size of social networks, a 30% increase in the number of community-based activities undertaken in

the previous month and a 25% increase in the variety of community-based activities undertaken in the previous month. However, research has highlighted a lack of access to PCP: genuine person centred care is proving difficult to achieve for everyone who could benefit (Mansell and Beadle-Brown 2004). In 2014, only 58% of people with learning disabilities in Scotland had a Personal Life Plan (PLP) (SCLD, 2015). This is unlikely to be because the other 42% do not need one or have refused to have one. Research carried out by Robertson et al. (2005) found that the people who are least likely to have a plan are those with an autism diagnosis, and those whose learning disability is compounded by mental health, behavioural and health issues i.e. people whose lives are most difficult and who are most disadvantaged (Orsmond, Shattuck et al. 2013).

Developing a genuine and meaningful PLP is a time consuming and skilled process which requires workers to take a reflective and skilled approach to communication, especially when a person does not use formal language (Lingard, Cooper et al. 2013) (Lawton 2009). The worker also needs to believe that the person concerned is capable of participating in decision making about themselves and wider matters, and to work in ways which empower people (Carter, Cameron et al. 2013). The difficulty of meeting these requirements should not be underestimated, especially when the people involved in the care of a person with complex needs are often under considerable pressure themselves (Boelman and Russell 2013).

Personalisation and the asset based approach have much in common. However, the point that can be drawn from the above evidence is that asset based approaches for people with learning disabilities cannot sidestep the issues that have tended to impede the progress of the personalisation agenda. Many of the barriers which exclude people from having Person Centred Planning will also exclude them from participating in communities. And for many people with learning disabilities, having a genuinely co-produced PLP is likely to be a necessary first step towards ensuring they get the support they need to participate more fully in their local community. If the personalisation agenda is allowed to exist in a vacuum without taking into account the need for welcoming and 'hospitable' communities it is, as Cormac Russell notes in his preface, in danger of 'building bridges into nowhere.'

- **Local Area Coordination**

Local area coordination (LAC) offers a mechanism for strengthening the links that people with learning disabilities have with their community, and for stimulating the development of relevant asset based projects (SCLD 2010, Broad 2012). LACs can, and sometimes do, have a central role in facilitating links between people with learning disabilities and asset based initiatives in their community. They share a common philosophy and principles. However, research findings suggest that the system may need to be strengthened for this to happen consistently. There is evidence that the volume of work and the needs of the people they are working with make it difficult for coordinators to focus on developing community capacity (Broad 2012, Peter Fletcher Associates 2011, Brown, Karatzias et al. 2013). Funding problems and the absence of the requirement on local authorities to provide LAC, means that although the service is well received coverage is uneven (Stalker and et al. 2007, Peter Fletcher Associates 2011),. In 2014 only 10% of people with learning disabilities in Scotland used LAC

services (SCLD 2015). The challenge of developing LAC without risking a reduction in the provision of other services to those who need them is openly acknowledged (Scottish Executive 2007).

The above evidence suggests that while LAC is no doubt a crucial component in facilitating an asset based approach for people with learning disabilities in many places, there are too many gaps and inconsistencies to assume that this will be the case.

### Local Area Coordination in Edinburgh

The Edinburgh Team is one of several LAC teams across Scotland and is one of the largest. They work with adults aged 16 – 65 years old who have a low to moderate learning disability, an acquired physical disability or have a long term condition; people who are not usually eligible for a supportive package of care from the local authority. Many are isolated and faced with the challenges of everyday life, struggle to stay in good physical and mental health. The LAC Team describes itself as offering a person-led service. People bring their needs and interests to the team, who work alongside them to:

- Cope with daily life challenges and establish a fuller and more active lifestyle.
- Create a positive outlook about opportunities that are possible, manageable and enjoyable.
- Participate in community activities, and society in general; to gain identity as an active citizen.

There is an emphasis on self-management and empowerment. This means a shift away from a traditional model where the service does things to a person, towards one where the person themselves is in the driving seat. “It is not about going in and doing it for the person; it is about looking at what they have to offer and how we can support them to build on that skill.”

The work of the team is described as being asset based:

*“We look at the qualities people have, we look at the gifts – we look at what they have to offer – what other people can benefit from. We pretty much treat people as building blocks. We help to build strong bonds and communities that are meaningful and sustainable.”*

This is helped by the fact that the worker usually comes from the same part of the city, and has a good knowledge of what their community can offer and how it can be mobilised: *“We have the community links, the experience and knowledge. It is just about sharing that knowledge with the other person.”*

The benefits for people with learning disabilities can be far-reaching: *“People have routines and are part of something. There are other people who are expecting to see them; places to go and things to talk about. They are emotionally attached to people, productive and valued.”*

Source: Interview with Anne Marie Donaldson, workshop input from Vicky Nicholson and presentation from Susan Dalglish ‘Asset based community development’

- **Advocacy in the community**

Advocacy and self-advocacy are well established ways that people with learning disabilities and their allies claim their place in communities and networks (Goodley, Armstrong et al. 2003, Chapman, Bannister et al. 2012). For example, people with learning disabilities have for many years been centrally involved in advocacy groups (Ledger and Tilley 2006); co-produced art and drama (Calvert 2009, Goddard 2015); been informed and supported to engage in the Scottish Referendum (Hood 2016); co-run dating websites; become involved in sport as participants (Carter and Williams 2012) and fans (Southby 2013) and campaign as activists.

Two points can be made about these developments that are relevant here. First, some of these advocacy initiatives fit well under the heading of an asset based approach and could be said to demonstrate its value. Others which are equally powerful have a clear mission to address deficits and problems; what is not working. Second, these developments provide an important reminder that while their neighbourhood community is an important point of reference for people with learning disabilities, so are networks founded on common experiences, interests and concerns.

### **People First (Scotland)**

People First (Scotland) is a well-established independent self-advocacy organisation. It started in Scotland in 1989 when members at the first National Conference decided that they should have their own organisation. It is a membership organisation open only to people who have a learning difficulty or what services call a learning disability. That means that no-one else has any say at all in what the organisation does. From the very beginning, decisions and policies were decided by people who have a learning difficulty. There are over 1000 people in Scotland who belong to People First and there are approximately 100 groups meeting at least once a month. People First has offices in different parts of Scotland and has close links with many People First groups in England and Wales. They are also involved in People First Europe and keep in touch with groups in other countries.

The ethos of People First overlaps with the assets based approach in emphasising what people can do and are capable of doing. However, as an advocacy organisation, social attitudes towards people with learning difficulties is one of challenges, with discrimination being identified as the root cause of many of the problems people with learning disabilities face. This is nicely described in a summary of the group work that took place at the anniversary conference 2014:

*“One interesting thing that happened was all of the groups raised some of the same points even though they were discussing different issues. It became clear that you cannot look for different solutions to the different problems we face if the basic conditions about how we are treated are not tackled. One member said it would be like building towers without solid foundations. It was important to build the strong foundations first and not just try to tackle the issues of health inequality, crimes against us and loneliness and lack of relationships. They are all part of the same thing and they are all connected up by the way we are seen and how we are treated. The main issues on all of the topics came out as:*

- being treated like children*
- not being listened to*
- not being given time to understand*
- not being included, not being accepted*
- and not being helped to learn.”*

Steve Robertson (Chairperson, People First (Scotland)) emphasised the importance of equality in his speech *“We believe we have a right to the support we need to take part in society and to live an ordinary life. We want to be fully included in all areas of our lives and to be treated as equal citizens.”*

Working in advocacy groups has the potential to bring the kinds of personal gains claimed by the assets based approach. Monica Hunter comments:

*“Well, what can you say? Twenty-five years of fighting to get our rights. Of course that experience has made a difference to me. I think People First has helped me to become an adult; it’s helped me to grow up and to expect to get treated like a grown up. I think I’ve had the chance to get respect for some of the things I’ve done. It’s also helped me to face things I was afraid about”.*

In summary, the work of People First provides a reminder of one of the limitations of the asset based approach which is that while equality is a central determinant of project related practices and relationships, the impact of inequalities on the lives of participants is ignored. People First tells us why this should not happen.

Source: Conversation with Rhona Neill at People First National Office, and information from their website and their anniversary publication

(People First (Scotland) 2014)

#### 4.4. Links between asset based working and other paradigms

As part of our literature review we considered the extent to which there are similarities and differences between key elements of thinking which underpin asset based approaches and other paradigms which inform work with people with learning disabilities.

- **Strengths based thinking**

A core component of the asset based approach is the critique of the deficit model accompanied by a shift towards a more holistic view of people and communities including their abilities, capacities and capabilities. This strength based thinking is not new: there is a long tradition in mental health (Pilgrim 2014, Williams and Watson 2015), learning disability (Goodley 2001) and the field of disability more widely (Oliver 1996). Personalisation has long been concerned with mobilising the strength, resilience and creativity of individuals and groups to achieve positive changes in identity, relationships and the trajectories of peoples' lives. One salient lesson to be drawn from this body of published work is that while progress can be made, the pace of change is often slow.

A key difference between asset based approaches and many other strengths based ways of working is the primacy given to community development and to building social connections. This can be helpful in re-focusing attention from an often highly individualised view of people with learning disabilities towards seeing people as part of networks and communities. However, many people with learning disabilities require additional support to enable their participation as community members. This suggests that for asset based approaches to work for people with learning disabilities there needs to be mechanisms in place to facilitate their involvement; which takes individual characteristics into account.

- **Promoting social connectedness**

Asset based approaches emphasise the importance of social connections and the strengths that derive from these. The evidence for the positive psychological impacts of being in groups and belonging to groups is well known within social psychology (Hogg and Abrams 1988, Levine 2013). This is also something many people, including those with learning disabilities explicitly say they value (Stacey and Edwards 2013). However, the assets approach, by definition, largely ignores evidence that disadvantaged and oppressed people receive social psychological benefits from engaging in social action (e.g. consciousness-raising activities, community activism and social movements) that specifically address the injustices in their lives (Thompson 2002, Freire 2005, Gilchrist, Bowles et al. 2010).

- **Inequalities and rights based thinking**

Another key working assumption of the asset based approach is that welfare services are dominated by systems of hierarchical and professionalised power and that the interests of service users are not served by relationships between service providers and users that are unequal in power and status (Duffy 2012). An important element of ABCD is the willingness of professional staff and other stakeholders to share power and there is evidence that this can and does happen (Foot 2012, McLean and McNeice 2012). For example, workers in successful projects consistently talk about 'working with' rather than 'doing to' people and often strongly demonstrate a belief in working with participants as equals. Again, this commitment to minimising power differences is not new or unique to projects describing themselves as asset based. For example, it is a central principle of feminist practice (Watson and Williams 1992) and a common goal of a range of service user movements which seek to realise peoples' human rights (Thompson 2002, McKeown, Dix et al. 2014).

One critique of the asset based approach is that it serves to direct attention away from the problems and difficulties created by social inequalities and power relationships which shape the lives of individuals and communities. Critics argue that there is not a clear invitation for people and communities to reflect upon and respond to widening inequalities and their associated harm and that participants are given few opportunities for organised resistance (MacLeod and Emejulu 2014). Instead, the encouragement is to focus on what they do have. The typical response to this criticism within the asset based literature is not to deny that the lives of vulnerable groups are shaped by injustice, but that responsibility for addressing these matters should lie elsewhere. There is certainly no suggestion that the approach should replace investment in improving services or tackling the structural causes of health inequality (Foot and Hopkins 2010, Glasgow Centre for Population Health 2011). Nonetheless, there are grounds for suggesting that this may be an unhelpful separation in practice. For example, research into two pilot asset based projects in Wakefield noted that the more deprived community found it more difficult to 'stay positive' and focus purely on assets, and concluded that the development of a more integrated approach which captured both needs and assets could work very well (Wakefield District Council 2011). An international study of asset based work with extremely poor rural women in Africa and Asia also concluded that it was a valid approach but that it must co-exist with initiatives to improve distributional justice (Bull, Mittelmark et al. 2013). Indeed, there is strong evidence to show that focusing on the good things in life is not the only route to building and strengthening communities and groups. There are many examples of personal and social change motivated by a shared understanding of injustice (Thompson 2002, Freire 2005, Gilmartin and Slevin 2010). More specifically, there is evidence that when people with learning disabilities are given thoughtfully prepared information about their human rights, entitlements, opportunities to understand them and the skills and power to claim them, then real change can follow (Roberts, Greenhill et al. 2012, Hood 2016).

There is also a moral dimension to this argument. People with learning disabilities have a long history of being silenced about the injustices in their lives and it is important

not to collude with this in ways that make it more difficult for people to have a voice about these matters. Very high numbers of people with learning disabilities have been mistreated by their fellow humans and their lives shaped by loss, trauma and disadvantage (McCarthy 2014). Research indicates that more than 70% of women with learning disabilities have experienced sexual violence in their homes, services and communities (Hoong Sin, Hedges et al. 2009) (Chapman, Bannister et al. 2012, Walter-Brice, Cox et al. 2012, McCarthy 2014, Horn and Moss 2015). This is then often compounded by inadequate and re-traumatising responses from services and the criminal justice system (Taggart, McMillan et al. 2010, Hohl and Stanko 2015). Even people in open employment, often deemed to represent the gold standard of social integration, can feel isolated, unhappy and bullied (Wistow and Schneider 2003). An obvious way for the asset based approach to accommodate this criticism would be to also give participants permission to talk about the difficulties in their lives and to support their efforts to work alongside others to tackle a shared problem or injustice.

In summary, asset based approaches with their emphasis on people as community members and citizens rather than users of services, may offer some fresh opportunities to pursue greater equality. However, arguably these opportunities are only likely to be fulfilled if asset based thinking is accompanied by a recognition of inequalities and an understanding of the systems and processes which sustain power dynamics.

#### **4.5. Evidence of the benefits of asset based approaches**

We searched the existing literature for evidence that asset based approaches have benefits for people with learning disabilities.

- **Empowerment**

A commitment to empowerment and equality practices is the bedrock of the assets approach and this is reflected in the methods and practice of its adherents which include: asset mapping, appreciative inquiry, participatory appraisal and co-production (Kramer, Seedat et al. 2011, GCPH, 2012).

Supporting, enabling and empowering participants to realise their potential is a central theme in the asset based literature and there is evidence that these processes do take place in asset based projects (NHS Health Scotland 2011). On the basis of a review of nineteen projects, McLean and McNeice (2012:23) observe that:

*“Stories about success in these regards were ubiquitous from staff and participants. Participants spoke of having increased confidence and skills to cope with changes and difficulties in their lives. These stories were further supported by the personal benefit gained from volunteering and peer support opportunities.”*

McLean and McNeice (2012) also note other themes across the projects. For example, a strong commitment amongst staff that each person’s journey should be participant-led and leading to their independence from, rather than dependence upon, the project. Particular attention was given to what was considered to be the building blocks of transformational change e.g. a sense of belonging, positive forms of identity, positive values and hopes and plans for the future. There is recognition that it isn’t about short term impacts but about “equipping individuals with a set of core values, skills and

abilities to manage and overcome future difficulties in their lives and, crucially, to have a sense of worth and purpose” (McLean and McNeice 2012:30). It was also clear from this review and other reports that participants valued opportunities to give something back to the project by providing peer support in the form of e.g. volunteering and mentoring (Greetham 2011).

Friedli (2013:139) highlights the potential rewards of being involved in an asset based project: “Coming together to change things for the better is inspiring and empowering.” These are as pertinent to people with learning disabilities as any other group of people. These rewards include: being treated as a person first, enriched social networks, more opportunities (including the opportunity to give something back) as well as improvements in status, control and a sense of belonging (McLean and McNeice 2012, Friedli 2013). This is an attractive prospect in the context of evidence about the low levels of participation of people with learning disability in employment and society more generally (Forrester-Jones, Gore et al. 2010). However, there is very little published work that describes the fine grain of the practicalities of engaging people with learning disabilities in initiatives like this; the participation of most people, especially those with complex needs, is likely to be dependent on a functioning and cooperative external support system which in itself can present both a contradiction and a challenge.

- **Health gains**

The significant inequalities in health experienced by people with learning disabilities continues to attract attention in Scotland (NHS Scotland 2004, The Scottish Government 2013) and elsewhere (Mencap 2015). There is an understandable hope that asset based approaches may offer a new contribution to these persistent inequalities. However, there is a lack of evidence from the literature to suggest that the asset based approach is an effective means of achieving health gains for people with learning disabilities. At present there is considerable uncertainty about whether the approach can prevent or reverse the main avoidable causes of health difficulties in any vulnerable group. There is a lack of research evidence about the “significant processes involved and the types and scale of effects that can be achieved” (Glasgow Centre for Population Health 2012:3). This does not deny that there are likely to be health benefits for people with learning disabilities of being active members of healthy and sustainable communities, it is just not clear to what extent taking an asset based approach can achieve this end (Marmot, Allen et al. 2010). In fairness to those advocating asset based approaches, they are not offering a ‘golden bullet’ to resolve issues of health inequalities and it is unreasonable to expect them to do so. Involving communities in co-producing initiatives that will reduce health inequalities has to be better than not involving them; but this should not divert attention from the structural factors underlying the social determinants of health for people with learning disabilities.

## 5. Asset based approaches and people with learning disabilities in Scotland

In this section we describe what we have found from our review about asset based approaches and people with learning disabilities. We start with what we have learned from our informant interviews about peoples' understanding of asset based working and the extent to which they believe they are being applied.

### 5.1. How people understand asset based approaches

We started the review with the hypothesis that the people most familiar with the language and concepts of asset based approaches would come from community development and that those mainly specialising in the learning disability field would be less familiar. By and large, our interviews have confirmed that this is generally the case, but we have also found a great deal of interest in asset based approaches among those working with people with learning disabilities and evidence that this awareness is growing:

*“Asset based approaches are very much on the agenda at the moment - we're currently looking at integrating the thinking into practice and changes in delivery.”*

In some areas, local authorities and their partners have adopted asset based approaches across all their work, and in these places staff working with people with learning disabilities are perhaps more aware of the concepts than elsewhere (see the case studies of East Ayrshire and Fife below). Some organisations, particularly those in the third sector have consciously adopted asset based approaches and others have gained an awareness of asset based approaches because they are part of networks where they have been discussed. Local Area Co-ordinators, for example, commonly use asset based terminology.

## Vibrant Communities in East Ayrshire

East Ayrshire Council's Vibrant Communities Service describes itself as working 'with and for' local communities rather than 'doing to' them. It was set up to get the Council working better with communities and to move away from 'departmentalism' towards a focus on outcomes. It is underpinned by a whole authority strategy and aims at whole system change. The intention is that local communities have the chance to lead on positive change and regeneration in their local area. In the two years since the strategy started, fourteen locally led action plans have been published.

Vibrant Communities is an explicitly asset based initiative.

*"We describe what we are in ABC language - it does now have currency. It's not about public services fixing problems for passive recipients. We focus on the strengths, assets, potential - it can be small things which inspire people, which bring wider benefits."*

Vibrant Communities aims to involve the whole community from the very young to the very old. Central to the initiative is the aim to involve all different groups - but with an awareness that different people will have different support needs to enable their involvement. The Lifeskills and Inclusion Team is the Vibrant Communities team that supports people to acquire the knowledge, skills and confidence necessary to play an active role in their personal, community and working lives. The team takes an explicitly asset based approach to learning which recognises people's unique personal experiences and builds on their strengths, talents and aspirations. They provide literacy and numeracy support, financial and political literacy learning programmes, digital access, core skills and employability training: and all include people with learning disabilities. They also work with other teams and services to promote integration and inclusion, e.g. active schools co-ordinators work with pupils with additional support needs and sports providers to integrate into mainstream sport. Three LACs work within this team.

Specific social network groups have been developed by the East Ayrshire LACs. These include:

**Coffee Mates Lunch Club** in Kilmarnock was developed by LACs. It is open every Monday from 12 noon till 1pm in the Howard Centre, Kilmarnock, serving homemade food and freshly prepared sandwiches. Volunteers who have a learning disability set up the 'pop-up café' each week. They take orders, wait on tables and assist the cook. All have undertaken courses in food handling and preparation and undergo regular refresher training. The club is very popular with the volunteers who take decisions as a group about matters such as their uniform, new dishes on the menu and how the club profits should be spent. Some feel they may be able to use the skills they have learned in future employment while others would like to increase their confidence and tackle more challenging tasks, such as making toasties or serving hot drinks.

**The ‘Things Tae Dae’ Social Hub** in Cumnock started as an informal support group for people with learning disabilities. After receiving some assistance from the team, it now has its own committee, runs weekly social get-togethers for members and organises regular trips and outings to new places. They have also built up very good relationships with the local football club, Cumnock Juniors FC, and with Dumfries House, where members have been helping to clear the garden area.

Enjoyable, lively, participatory clubs like these may well have existed prior to Vibrant Communities. However, what has changed in East Ayrshire is that these clubs are regarded not as ‘LD services’ but as assets for the whole community and as part of a pattern of self-help, grass roots community involvement. As part of a ‘vibrant community’ they are well connected to other things going on and are able to identify a wide range of other activities and opportunities for their members to become involved alongside disabled and non-disabled members of the community: *“In East Ayrshire it means we expect much more of our communities and that groups will be open and welcoming to everybody; and that everyone will be seen as equal citizens with things to offer. What’s different is that we’re part of something bigger; rather than just being an island of asset based working in the midst of a sea of deficit approaches.”*

Source: interview with Jim Murdoch, Team leader Lifeskills and Inclusion; review of website and meeting with members of Coffee Mates and Local Area Coordinators in Kilmarnock in February 2016.

## Asset based working in Fife

**Fife Community Asset Mapping Project** has been taking place in different venues, towns and villages all over Fife. The Mapping has been carried out by the LACs from Fife's Self-Directed Support Team in Health and Social Care, along with people from partner organisations, BRAG Enterprises and Enable Fife's Self Directed Support Project, 'We Can All Do It'.

Each Mapping session has involved meeting local citizens of all ages and from all backgrounds to identify people, places, activities, organisations and groups that local people value in their community. It is an opportunity to chat about their communities and to share what they know. Everyone in the various communities and locations was invited to come along, so some people with learning disabilities did contribute to this mapping of community assets. The information is then put onto a Map of the area using sticky post-its, drawings or other objects.

The information gathered is being added to a new community website 'On Your Doorstep' which has been developed as a tool to assist everybody in Fife, including people who use services, carers, practitioners and care providers, to explore local opportunities and sources of information and support.

In February 2016, a Conference and a Community Marketplace Event was held involving Stallholders from a host of groups and organisations across Fife.

### **We Can All Do it!**

A small team based at Enable in Fife is working in partnership with other organisations and local communities to develop asset based approaches to inclusion. Raymond Brennan from Enable Fife explains:

*"The emphasis is on people making the best use of what's available in their communities, which links to their interests and passions. The traditional response to people with learning disabilities is to see what services are available; but we find that people are not always eligible for a service or a budget for the support they may need to do what's important to them. On the other hand, services are not always the best response to supporting people to do what matters in their life and to use the gifts they have to follow their dreams. Following the community mapping of resources, the next phase is to think about people and communities. We want to identify the people who can be community builders - people who are looking for something more and are natural community connectors. We want to find out who they are and how to support and sustain them. We're having engagement events, pop up shops and using forum theatre, to engage the whole community and begin to learn what people are most proud of and what really matters to them. The important thing is that people with learning disabilities have more choice to do the things they enjoy in community places where they feel included, welcomed and valued by other members of their community. Not doing separate stuff. There are some very early messages given to people that they can't be included. We want to challenge that thinking."*

Source: Interviews with Raymond Brennan and information provided by LAC Sylvia Thomson.

People involved in initiatives such as Vibrant Communities and Fife's On Your Doorstep are now using the language of asset based working. Other people we have interviewed have told us that they do not use the term asset based but they recognise the values and principles of asset based working and see them as relevant to their work:

*"Disability organisations tend to use different language; there's a whole plethora. We tend to use the term strength based; the whole ethos is about strengths, capacities and belief in people."*

When we asked people what they understood asset based approaches to be about, most were clear about what they thought it meant:

*"I see it as being about capitalising on individual's skills and aspirations so that they and their communities benefit."*

*"It's looking at the assets of the individual and the assets of the community and then figuring out how to marry to two."*

*"We look at the qualities people have, we look at their gifts; we look at what they have to offer; what other people can benefit from."*

*"Working with individuals, working with communities, using our resources effectively to benefit everyone; not just one person."*

When we asked people whether they thought asset based approaches were relevant to learning disabilities, most thought they were. But there was some scepticism about whether it contributed anything new or different:

*"Asset based is a new term but not a new concept."*

*"We tend to suffer from a re-invention of terms so I'm not entirely clear whether the asset based language is useful or not."*

There were also some who felt that the language was not helpful in communicating with people with learning disabilities and some who were cautious about adopting any terminology that could be construed as jargonistic or excluding:

*"I'm familiar with the term but we try not to use any of the language from service land. Even words that started out neutral like 'personalisation' have become fairly meaningless."*

However, despite some doubts about the terminology associated with asset based approaches, there seems to be general support for the principles. There was a commonly held view among our informants that there were strong links between asset based approaches and what people saw as positive, strengths based approaches which combine being person-centred with a recognition of the importance of community and social connectedness. As one person succinctly put it:

*"The starting point is how you see people. As a person, as part of the community, as a citizen."*

Unlike community development work which tends to start with the community as the focus, most people working in the learning disability field start with a focus on

individuals. As part of this review we therefore tried to explore what asset based working might mean for individuals with learning disabilities, as well as what it might mean for people in the context of their communities and as citizens. In the following sections we consider some examples of asset based approaches with people with learning disabilities in a range of contexts and roles, as:

- People with interests, skills and talents.
- People who work and volunteer.
- People who use support to enable them to do things.
- People who are part of communities.
- People as citizens.

## **5.2. Asset based approaches with people who have interests, skills and talents**

At one time, people with learning disabilities were rarely perceived as having skills and talents. Fortunately, attitudes have changed and there are now many examples of projects which offer people an opportunity to share their interests and develop their talents; whether they be artistic, musical, sporting, or have an interest in any other activity. However, there is still a tendency for these to be provided in non-inclusive settings i.e. through specialist projects providing solely to people with learning disabilities. The degree to which there is greater inclusion of people with learning disabilities in mainstream activities is difficult to monitor (groups rarely collect this information) but anecdotal evidence suggests that it remains variable, though improving.

Approaches that are more asset based have the following features:

- They take place in mainstream settings and include people from a range of abilities.
- Activities derive from the interests of the people involved.
- People contribute to decisions and planning of activities.
- There are opportunities for people to develop and learn new things.
- People get the opportunity to share their learning with others.
- Activities are satisfying in themselves and also offer opportunities to increase social networks, develop confidence and acquire transferable skills.

## Project Ability

Project Ability is a visual arts organisation which has been going for over 30 years. It is based in an arts centre in central Glasgow alongside eight other visual arts organisations, providing an artistic environment for people who come along.

They offer year round programmes and, Aspire, the programme for people with disabilities delivers nine workshops a week with 124 places. Each workshop runs for eight sessions but people can sign up for longer if they want.

There is no formal referral process for accessing Project Ability. People make contact themselves or find out by word of mouth or via other agencies they are involved with. The Aspire programme is used by people with a range of abilities; some have supporters who stay with them, others do not.

The approach taken by Project Ability is very flexible. People can come for a one-off session or set of workshops or stay on and do more. The project also links people in to other activities such as art masterclasses or walking groups.

Project Ability has a studio group for people with learning disabilities who want to develop their art further; this is self-led with professional artists and volunteers on hand. They provide year round exhibition opportunities for their artists. This studio group has nurtured some very talented and highly motivated artists including Cameron Morgan who is establishing a national reputation and is currently working on a major UK arts commission funded by Unlimited which will see him exhibited during Glasgow International, in Wales, the Southbank Centre in London and Tramway, Glasgow.

However, Artistic Executive Director, Elisabeth Gibson is clear that this is exceptional and there are major barriers to people with learning disabilities earning a living from their art:

*“Most artists make a living via other work connected to the art world such as facilitating workshops, administering exhibitions and so forth. Most of these opportunities are not open to people with learning disabilities so we’re keen to develop chances for people to learn facilitation skills as volunteer co-facilitators where they work alongside other artists.”*

One way Project Ability is developing this is via a small grant from the Scottish Government to run outreach workshops in other parts of Scotland. At the moment they are involved in delivering workshops for people with learning disabilities in north east Scotland, Perth, Oban, South Lanarkshire and Edinburgh. These are fun, creative events facilitated by two artists, one of whom has learning disabilities. Elisabeth comments:

*“We’re generally inundated with people who want to come. We use the workshops to have fun, share some skills and connect people. We always try to use public transport to show that it is possible to do these things by bus. That helps to connect people too”.*

For more information, see the Project Ability website.

Source: Phone interview with Elisabeth Gibson and review of website.

### hazelwoodVISION musicALL Project

musicALL is an inclusive music project based in, and developing at, Hazelwood School in Glasgow and is overseen by the charity hazelwoodVISION. Hazelwood is a school for children and young people from 2-18 years with sensory impairments (visual and hearing), and other additional learning disabilities. It affords increasing numbers of young people who require additional support for learning (ASL) the opportunity to experience, create, rehearse and perform high quality music inclusively and in a variety of different settings.

Julie McKenzie, music teacher and music development officer at Hazelwood explains how it all started:

*“We had two young men in the school who we spotted as really talented musically; one was a gifted singer and the other a drummer. If they had been teenagers in mainstream school they’d have had loads of opportunities to do things with their music; to join bands etc. So we decided to start a band for them and soon other children got involved and before long they were in demand to go out performing.”*

With support from hazelwoodVISION Julie was given more time to develop the project, bring other tutors in and gradually create a framework of music support to enable students to develop the quality of their music.

musicALL has made links with local mainstream schools so that students from Hazelwood and other schools make music together. musicALL aims to promote inclusion by enabling young people, with and without ASL, to work together to build relationships through the joy and fun of making music. They enable young people to develop new skills in samba drumming, rock music, improvised music and in sound and music technology and to share their talents through performance.

*“It’s often our pupils who are demonstrating rhythms to other children. It breaks down barriers and any initial awkwardness just disappears when they’re enjoying making the music together.”*

For more information, see the musicALL hazelwoodVISION website.

Source: Interview with Julie McKenzie and reports provided.

There is a growing number of examples of inclusive activities. For example, Inspire in Aberdeen is working with a new charity, the Aberdeen Football Club Community Trust. They have set up a five-a-side club offering training for young men with learning disabilities for a couple of hours on a Friday afternoon with a proper qualified coach. Some of these have now moved on to a mixed team including people with a range of different disabilities and some who have no disabilities at all. The Scottish Government have provided funding for a range of inclusive sports activities; including football, rugby, golf and dance.

### **Indepen-dance**

Indepen-dance is an inclusive dance development company for disabled people and their carers to enjoy, express and fulfil their potential through dance. Its purpose is to enable participation in a high quality arts provision and improve the health, quality of life and opportunities for disabled people. They provide weekly creative movement and dance classes, quarterly training in inclusive dance practice and annual performance projects, as well as offering opportunities for careers in dance. Participants become lifelong members and join a thriving social network. Indepen-dance nurtures people to experience improved health, wellbeing, confidence and communication skills.

Their artistic approach is to ensure people who have physical and/or learning disabilities are fully included in the creative process of making, performing and being an audience for dance. All activities are offered to people with and without disabilities, providing everyone with the opportunity to learn from each other and share a creative experience. Indepen-dance runs a range of core and specialist classes including Touch Trust Classes aimed at supporting those with severe and complex learning disabilities to access creative movement sessions. The sessions encourage the participant's self-development and active life-long learning within a social, creative and nurturing environment.

Outreach work includes one-off workshops or a block of classes as well as training events, continued professional development, tailored projects or special performances. Some examples of current activities include a programme of weekly dance classes for disabled children, young people and adults. The creative movement and dance classes take a person-centred approach to dance, using music and props to assist participants' expression and enjoyment through dance, giving people the freedom to experience, explore and create movement together.

For more information, visit the Indepen-dance website.

Source: Review of website and additional information provided by project.

### 5.3. Asset based approaches with people who work or volunteer

It is widely accepted that employment is central to social inclusion and the well-being of people with learning disabilities (Humber 2014). It has been estimated that 65% of people with learning disabilities would like a paid job (Emerson, Malam et al. 2005). However, in the context of limited employment opportunities for everyone, people with learning disabilities face increasing barriers to paid work.

Considerable knowledge has accumulated about what it takes to support people into employment through person-centred approaches (Blamires 2015). The main problem is not an absence of creative and engaging ideas (Boelman and Russell 2013). There is a wide range of initiatives aimed at developing employability skills and giving people the opportunity to experience work through work placements and volunteering. For example, cafes involving people with learning disabilities as workers appear to have become particularly popular. This field has great potential as a source of expertise about involving people with learning disabilities in asset based work including the fine detail of achieving change with individuals in community settings; as well as the challenges commonly encountered. However, there can be major challenges in replicating and embedding successful projects (Blamires 2015).

#### **Social Enterprise of the Year Scotland 2015 - COPE LTD**

COPE Ltd is a well-established and successful social enterprise and social firm that has been operating in Shetland and Orkney for sixteen years with a turnover of over £1 million. It has a strong social purpose: supporting the development of employment skills for people with learning disabilities. COPE believes that everyone, regardless of their disability, should have the opportunity to work if they so wish. Given the right conditions, all adults have the potential to contribute to our local economy and in doing so will learn to value themselves and others.

Not all employment projects are founded on asset based principles. In the course of this review we were told about examples which present themselves as providing meaningful work experience and training but which in reality are little different to a day service. Initiatives which are more asset based: start with people's interests and capabilities; create opportunities for people to develop these and learn new skills; engage them in 'real work' as members of 'real work teams'; and makes a contribution to the community or to society at large.

## Fife Community Support Service: Work Options

Fife Community Support Service has traditionally supported people in a variety of voluntary and employment settings. The Work Options Programme has been designed to assist people to look at their abilities, strengths and aspirations and achieve their potential in the world of work through an individualised support package. Some people are in paid employment but most people start by doing voluntary work. *“It isn’t about earnings it is about social inclusion.”* All people have to do is say *“I would like a job”* and it happens from there. The service is expanding because it is successful and there are people on the waiting list.

Everything is carefully planned and documented by the service e.g. the person’s CV, their job analysis, risk assessments, and work reviews. The aim is to meet the needs of the individual and the employer. The third sector is most receptive to including people with learning disabilities in the workforce, but there are exceptions.

**Examples:** Both of these examples show the careful thought and considerable effort that is required from all parties involved to successfully integrate people with significant learning disabilities into the working life of their communities. As such they reveal some of the fine grain of successful asset based work:

A young man with autism is employed by a skip hire firm. He works just enough hours to keep within the earning limit and has a support worker with him one-to-one. He prepares and paints skips which he both enjoys and is good at doing. When he wanted to keep working during the winter the firm responded by building him a shelter. He has lunch in the canteen with other workers. It has worked well and the employer is now looking for further employment opportunities.

A woman in her early 50s with profound learning disabilities provides help to older people in a day care centre: she gives out their cutlery, special drinking cups and so forth, then takes their lunches through and finally loads the dishwasher. *“This may not sound much but it is huge for her and they love her.”* All sorts of job coaching tools were used to take her through every stage of the job. *“It meant thinking about what she could do, then making it happen.”* She has photos of herself at each stage, displayed on the wall though does not need to look at them anymore. *“When you see someone with their uniform on and you can see the pride that they have in it: that is so rewarding.”*

Source: Interview with Eunice Brown, Work Options Coordinator

## Tayberry Enterprise Ltd Dundee: Empowerment through Employment

Tayberry Enterprise provides creative art activities, volunteer opportunities and training placements in catering for people with significant health barriers to employment. It runs a café for the staff of Dovetail Enterprise, Dundee Employment Unit and an outside catering service. The placements are tailored to the needs of individuals and are not time limited. A number of individuals have been supported into employment within the hospitality industry upon completion of their training. Tayberry is unusual in having a mixed range of people involved, including a high proportion who have a learning disability. Lorna Strachan is an Occupational Therapy Team Leader in Dundee's Learning Disability Service and also a Director of Tayberry Enterprise. She explains:

*"Tayberry was initially started by an Occupational Therapy colleague to support people with long-term mental health conditions who experience huge barriers to employment. When I heard about the work of Tayberry, I persuaded them to open it up to people with learning disabilities, and it now includes individuals with long term health conditions who can benefit."*

One of the trainees described their experience at Tayberry: *"Before Tayberry I was out of work for one year; I lost confidence and became ill. Now I am more confident, I know that I have skills and I have a fair idea of my future work options... I have learnt things now I didn't think I could do. I have more confidence working with other people ... I feel I could now work in another cafe and definitely feel I could cope with busy times... I can now keep calm."*

In addition to the employment training, Tayberry provides workshops, classes and numerous volunteering opportunities: *"Volunteers tend to come with their own ideas, skills and interests so we mould the opportunity around them rather than looking for people to fit our ideas. The basic building blocks for everyone are confidence and communication skills which in turn will enable people to make life choices."*

Tayberry Arts have a variety of creative arts projects which inspire, educate and build confidence. Projects include an African based drumming group Drumdee who perform at festivals and events; Inform Theatre who raise awareness of equality, diversity and disability through their performance work; and Sensory Storytellers who deliver sensory storytelling sessions to groups and individuals with multiple and profound disabilities. Over the last two years they have developed a Storyteller Apprenticeship scheme in partnership with the charity, PAMIS. So far, three trainee Storytellers have spent time with PAMIS to gain awareness of complex and profound disabilities and an understanding of how they engage with the Sensory Storytelling experience. The apprentices shadow a professional storyteller and learn skills of delivery and performance through participation in an Inform Theatre project. The project now has keys to life funding to be developed across Scotland.

Source: interview with Lorna Strachan and review of website. For more information, see **the Tayberry Enterprise website**.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in people running their own businesses and some have made creative use of their Self-Directed Support budgets to buy the help they need to start and sustain small enterprises. As part of this review we were informally told of examples of people with learning disabilities running small enterprises as diverse as a DJ business, a jewellery import enterprise, egg production and a training consultancy. Wee Enterprizers help support such initiatives.

### **Wee Enterprizers: The Power of Wee**

Wee Enterprizers (WE) was set up in 2013 by the Social Care Ideas Factory (SCIF) in partnership with other organisations to develop table top businesses. It addresses two main ideas: innovative employment opportunities for people with disabilities and innovative social connectedness for people with disabilities.

The rationale for the WE idea was the need to provide a safe culture and space where people could meet and work collaboratively whilst exploring, 'what more choice and control over how they live their lives', could mean. An important part of this was an attempt to redress the imbalance in the labour market. Although inclusion in the labour market was one desired aspiration for the project, equally important was the idea that disabled people could reclaim their power to realise and utilise their own capabilities and potential.

The flexible model enables Enterprizers to drive the ideas themselves so that they set the pace and agenda for developing their own businesses starting with a formal recognition of their own skills and passions. Peer support is central to the success and sustainability of the Wee Enterprizers who can share business plans, marketing ideas, website development and trading opportunities. The Enterprizers have also developed social relationships with each other as a result of participating in the Wee Enterprizers idea and meet up during their leisure time.

An evaluation of WE by Glasgow Caledonian University illustrated a range of outcomes that have been produced by the WE. These outcomes, self-employment, personal growth and independence, result from WE engaging and interacting within a group of like-minded individuals with similar aims and goals. The project builds a form of employment forum and community connection for enterprizers that they do not appear to get from other supports.

Source: Review of website and evaluation report available online.

## 5.4. Asset based approaches for people who use support

As we have noted, personalisation has provided the value base for most work with people with learning disabilities in recent years and there is potential for links to be made between principles underpinning personalisation and those of asset based approaches. However, if personalisation in practice is to be asset based it needs to consider more than the individual in isolation, as this interviewee explained:

*“People might call it personalisation and it can be asset based but all too often it’s not. Often it’s just confined to the individual and doesn’t do anything to connect people or think about the wider community. For example, say Mary wants to go shopping. Normally the support worker will turn up and take her shopping; which is better than doing the shopping for her. But if they really wanted to take an asset based approach they’d think about the resources in the community and ways of building Mary’s relationships with local shopkeepers alongside developing her skills and giving her the tools to increase Mary’s capability to do her own shopping. The key things are thinking about the assets of the community alongside the strengths of the individual and their ability to learn. Often the theory is there but the practice is still not filtering through.”*

We asked people why they thought asset based practice with people who use support does not always happen. There were some recurring themes in the barriers people described:

- Attitudinal barriers: even the most committed and well-meaning staff get stuck in the same old ways of doing things and of thinking about people:
 

*“We need to start where people are at: what they can do...we’re often so entrenched in our ways of doing things. We need to think differently.”*
- Risk aversion: those working with people with learning disabilities have often been heavily influenced by adult protection policies. These are, of course, necessary, but an over emphasis on protecting people can result in them being prevented from doing things which might be construed as risky.
- “People are frightened of people with learning disabilities creating their own informal networks; can be overly protective.”
- “If we’re over anxious about protecting people we just end up talking up people’s deficits and encouraging fear.”
- Not enough staff time: this can be an excuse to avoid changing practice, but it is also a reality for many front-line staff. When support is commissioned in twenty minute blocks it is quicker to do Mary’s shopping for her than build the links with shopkeepers so she can do it herself.

*“Ironically, some of the most socially isolated are those people who have formal support; because the resources have to be used for the practical tasks there’s nothing left for the social side.”*

- Assessment, planning and funding systems which are still needs and deficits focused: there is a fundamental contradiction between many assessment processes and an asset based approach. In particular, meeting the eligibility criteria for funding and/or to meet the thresholds for social care support usually means presenting evidence of what people cannot do, with little attention paid to their assets.
- Service providers with vested interests: some organisations committed to working in asset based ways were clear that if they were successful they may put themselves out of a job. Their long-term goal was not to be needed any longer. However, for other service providers keeping people dependent is important for their sustainability and/or profit. Nevertheless, there are many examples of asset based working with individuals and in many places, people are finding ways of doing things differently. Sometimes these involve a radical re-think of ways of working and sometimes they involve changing practice in a smaller way to be more reflective of peoples' capacities and interests. When we asked what helped practice change with individuals, a recurring theme was people's willingness and commitment to doing things differently.

*“For example, an individual worker might think creatively about Mary’s ability to go shopping and find opportunities for her to learn the skills she needs or find ways of compensating for her difficulties e.g. developing a photo shopping list with her or recording her list on a mobile phone. Technology can be another key asset for people. Dementia friendly communities have shown that shops and supermarkets are willing to support their customers in all sorts of ways if you work with them.”*

### **‘Just Enough Support’ – an example from East Renfrewshire**

Angie McGregor, Senior Development Officer with East Renfrewshire Council Commissioning team, describes recent partnership working with a provider organisation, the Mungo Foundation and Helen Sanderson Associates in order to redesign services, identify individual Self Directed Support budgets and implement organisational change:

“The project was supported by Helen Sanderson Associates using the model of ‘Just Enough Support’. A ‘coaches’ team of local champions was developed and met regularly to feed into a Leadership team that would implement change. Both groups’ understanding was underpinned by training on person-centred thinking tools; Person Centred Planning; Just Enough Support Model and Working Together for Change.”

We used ‘Planning Live’ to develop a plan with each individual, their family, care manager and support staff to identify person-centred outcomes and initial action plans. The Coaches team was supported /mentored to become person centred review facilitators through a process of watching, doing and evaluation. Care managers were also involved throughout, allowing us to work in partnership to develop individual Self Directed Support budgets based on the outcomes important to people.

A forum for the people who use services was developed and this quickly began to have an influence. For example, service users developed profiles of ‘The good worker’ and ‘The good manager’ which are now used in all staff interview and selection processes.

After an initial round of Planning Live reviews, we used the outcomes from these to inform an event on ‘Working Together for Change’ which helped to embed this way of doing things for the future. Voluntary Action also joined us for ‘Planning Live’ and training events which meant we could work closely with them to identify and implement new community opportunities for people. Lots of people wanted more creative opportunities and this partnership has led to local independent arts and crafts groups, set up with lottery funding, with its own volunteers.

Source: Interview with Angie McGregor, Senior Development Officer, East Renfrewshire

## Having different conversations: an example from Iriss and South Lanarkshire

The Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (Iriss) is a charitable company with a mission to “...*promote positive outcomes for the people who use Scotland’s social services by enhancing the capacity and capability of the social services workforce to access and make use of knowledge and research for service innovation and improvement.*”

In 2015 Iriss undertook a project in South Lanarkshire to encourage and enable day centre staff to use a more outcome focused approach in their work. There are two particularly interesting things about this project as an asset based approach. The first was how it placed ‘learning to listen’ as the key skill that can shift services from gatekeeping access to a fixed menu of options to being facilitators of self-determined choices. The second was the involvement of people with learning disabilities as performers and co-facilitators of ‘experience labs’.

An experience lab is a safe space that supports people to experiment. The methodology has been used to experiment with citizen-led ideas and systems and processes within services (Mulgan 2014). In this initiative, each lab involved two daycare centre workers, one person who accesses support, a carer and a member of Iriss staff. Each group was given a scenario and asked to role play a conversation; first as they would normally do it, and a second time after input from the Iriss worker, introducing an outcomes-focused visual tool controlled by the person who accesses support. Group members then shared their experience of the two conversations and reflected on the implications for the role of staff and for the lives of learning disabled people.

*“It was obvious to everyone that normally conversations were not ‘open’ but about offering fixed options. It was dramatic sometimes, and sad, what staff discovered about themselves. Some found it scary that they didn’t have all the answers.”*

Since the lab, people who access support have fed back that the second experience during the lab felt different from the first: *“I was in control, not the staff”,* there was a *“difference in the way the staff listened... the lab was more about me.”* They reported feeling positive about what they want to achieve in life and in control of making this happen: *“the experience helped me think about where I am heading in life.”* Day centre staff reported that the lab *“shed a light on new ways of working.”*

The Iriss Team went back to South Lanarkshire a year later and found that managers had embraced the experience lab methodology and the findings from the Iriss experiment. The lab methodology was being replicated in each of the six daycare centres in South Lanarkshire. Time had been set aside for staff to have outcomes-focused conversations with service users and for staff to reflect about the changes in service provision. Staff were using tools that were developed during this project and have created tools of their own.

The Iriss outcomes, further information about their experience labs and a more detailed account of the South Lanarkshire experience can be found online.

Source: Interview with Gayle Rice, Iriss and review of report provided.

## Thistle Foundation - InterAct project

The InterAct project works alongside young disabled people, their families, schools, community connections and external partners to ensure that young people are at the heart of planning for their own futures. The work is focused on the transition from school to adult life and is based around the principle that young people and their families are the experts in the direction their lives should take, with strengths and resources that can help them to achieve what matters most to them. InterAct was developed in response to anxieties expressed by parents about the opportunities and support that would be available for young people with disabilities to help them make informed choices about their future once they left school. The project has three main facilitated parts:

**Drama:** The first part of the project is delivered within young people's schools by a community theatre company, Active Inquiry, alongside a young disabled actor. Over a series of sessions, using Theatre of the Oppressed techniques, young people explore their feelings about the future, and think about choice, change and diverse possibilities for life beyond school. Using drama and fiction as a vehicle, young people take on the role of experts directing the decisions and choices that are made.

*"Even though it was going through the character they'd created, the answers were THEIR hopes and THEIR fears and what they would be feeling at that time, which I think was amazing really. It helped them find a voice."* (teacher)

**Big Plan:** 'The Big Plan' brings together eight to twelve young people, alongside their families, friends and community volunteers, to make plans together for the life that they want beyond school. It focuses on the following question:

*"What would it take for this young man or woman to have an interesting, fulfilling life, where they can get to meet people who could become their friends, and make their contribution to the community?"*

Six sessions are facilitated by Thistle alongside a young person with lived experience of the transition from special school. Young people explore their strengths, hopes and dreams for the future, along with their family and people who know them best. It helps start a planning process which puts the young person's choices centre stage.

*"It made me think that from little gems of ideas, bigger plans can develop, and the power of the group / community is greater than what you can plan or imagine alone."* (parent)

*"It's given me an insight into what other people can do and confidence to show what I can do...to see how far I can go."* (young person)

**Peer meet-ups:** The InterAct meet-ups are designed to increase young people's participation and inclusion in ordinary social activities and places of their choosing, in their community, with their own peers. They were developed in

response to observation that young people from special schools were in danger of becoming isolated post-school, through barriers such as living in communities removed from their friends and networks, not being able to travel independently to reach common areas, or through families' fear of young people being out in the world unsupervised. Thistle work alongside people to address barriers, for example: building skills to travel alone or with friends, or growing confidence to be out without family members. The meet-ups are determined by young people's ideas and interests and they lead on deciding which ordinary places and experiences they want to try in order to broaden their knowledge and confidence in accessing what is out there for them in their city.

*"You feel you can do what you like, not reliant on parents, not a burden on anyone - it's a good thing, you've got your own freedom, you're making choices for yourself and know what's good for you and you gain more confidence in the end."* (young person)

*"This is probably the only project that has had significant impact - others are just a respite for parents, this is the only one focussed on developing the young people. It's innovative, cutting-edge."* (parent)

InterAct works locally across Edinburgh and Midlothian and is now spreading learning from the approach through building capacity with partners across Scotland. For more information see Thistle's short film on their website.

### **Linking asset based thinking with social pedagogy - an example from Camphill Communities**

Camphill communities in Scotland support people with learning disabilities and other support needs from the early years through to older age. There are eleven Camphill communities in Scotland which support more than 500 people. About two thirds of people live in communities, with others coming in to work during the day. Camphill communities focus on the needs of individuals and how people can be supported and encouraged to develop through community life.

Through The keys to life, Camphill were funded to explore the use of social pedagogy with adults with learning disabilities. In essence, social pedagogy is about using your relationship with a person, and the everyday things that you do together, to find out more about someone, their strengths and their ways of learning, which enable you to help them to develop. In the UK it has been mostly used as an approach to working with children, but across Europe has become the basis for working with a range of groups. Kirsten Hogg from Camphill Scotland makes the links between this and asset based ways of working:

*"One of the real benefits that we have found with social pedagogy, is that the simple models it uses validate people's instinctive ideas about working with others, and give them the language to explain to other people why relationships are important and what they hope to achieve with them."*

Kirsten provides an example of the social pedagogy approach in action:

*“A young man who lives in one of the Camphill communities has heightened spatial awareness. During a recent house move he was asked to help design the layout of some of the public spaces in the house; this helped him to feel comfortable in his new home and gave him a sense of purpose and ownership during what could otherwise have been a very difficult transition for someone with autism. His key worker built on this layout/design work by developing the young man’s love of photography and helping him to create story boards with his photos. These help with his communication, but have also been used to encourage him to try things outside of his comfort zone, for example he planned a trip to take photographs at the railway museum in Glasgow with his support worker, when previously this sort of travel had phased him too much.”*

The Social Pedagogy pilot project has been independently evaluated by the University of Edinburgh (2015) and is available on the Camphill Scotland website. A short film about the project can be found online.

Source: Email exchange with Kirsten Hogg.

A common theme in these examples is the importance of viewing people differently and relating to people differently from an assumption that people can make choices for themselves and that they have contributions to make:

*“We wouldn’t call people service users; they’re citizens with something to give. They’re not just recipients but contributors to society.”*

How people are perceived is core to how they respond. Several informants talked about their work with people who were labelled difficult or challenging. They made the point that people are often less challenging once you relate to them as people who can make choices and take control of their lives. This is illustrated by the experience of a C-Change project in Aberdeen:

### **From being controlled to taking control: an example from C-Change**

Sam Smith, CEO of C-Change, describes an asset based approach to a community living project in Aberdeen:

*“We tendered for services based in two tenement blocks which were supposed to be about community living but which weren’t working. When we got involved about three years ago things were so bad the residents all wanted to move out. Other agencies viewed them as difficult and challenging so the place was run in a very containing way with staff on sleeping nights, alarms etc. In fact, once we got to know them, the residents turned out to be an amazing group of people. We started by working on their life satisfaction and inclusion. We provided individual budgets so people could choose their support and recruit the staff they wanted. Only one person felt she wanted staff there overnight; so we talked to her about what would offer the reassurance she needed. She ended up using some of her personal budget to buy an iPad which she uses to check in with someone every night. Over the past three years, the places have completely transformed. There are no sleeping nights, no more alarms. People have moved off compulsory orders and make less use of in-patient services. People have relationships, some have jobs. One is setting up a catering business. The project costs less now than it did before. The money wasn’t the issue. The containing and controlling was.”*

Source: Interview with Sam Smith, CEO of C Change

One means of empowering people to control their own lives is through the provision of funding to give people choice and purchasing power. Exercising that power requires information; and in the Highlands, peer advisors are setting up a ‘trip advisor’ type of website to provide that information.

### Highland Self-Directed Support - Peer Advisors

Highland Self Directed Support began in 2013 as a consortium of partner organisations (Birchwood Highland, People First Highland, Health and Happiness and Cantraybridge College) which came together to develop a project in response to the new SDS legislation. The SDS Consortium wanted people who use health and social care services to be at the heart of their capacity building approach to ensure that the mantra of choice, flexibility and control are fully embedded within decision-making, idea development and support systems. Shirley Buchanan is the manager of the project, which is led by Cantraybridge College.

A cornerstone of the project has been recruiting and training peer service user advisors. These are paid positions for people with learning disabilities, autism and mental ill-health. At present there are three peer advisors with learning disabilities employed part-time. They provide advice and support to people on the SDS options, are developing a brokerage service and design and deliver training to health and social care professionals and other organisations. They are also collecting peoples' experience of using SDS via community journalism, filming and podcasts. These are shared on the website and Facebook page.

*"This will enable them to develop a website that will be like a Trip Advisor for support providers where they will assess them and write online reviews. This should help people to make decisions about who they want to provide support to them when they are using their budgets."*

Source: Interviews with Ellie Wolf, Health & Happiness and staff at Cantraybridge College

## 5.5. Asset based working with people as part of communities

Working in ways which increase people's personal choice and control is an important step in strengths based practice. But working with individuals in isolation from their communities is not fully asset based. Thinking about people with learning disabilities as active members of their communities involves viewing them as people with gifts to contribute to the community as well as considering what resources exist in the community which can contribute to their life.

*"There tends to be an assumption that people with disabilities don't connect with their communities. But many do. Some individuals (and communities) are pretty resilient. But it can be challenging; we need to learn from the experience of people who overcome these challenges."*

People who have this experience include the experts involved with Health and Happiness in the Highlands, who have a wealth of experience of working with the assets of people with learning disabilities.

## Health and Happiness in the Highlands

Health & Happiness began as a community development initiative in 1999 funded by the Big Lottery Fund, NHS Highland and Highland Council. Health and Happiness came from the dream of local adults with learning disabilities to make positive change happen in the Highlands.

“Our dream is that through ‘Health and Happiness’ the Highlands will become a place where we have control over our own lives and the services we receive. We will be part of our local communities; living here, working here, and enjoying leisure and recreation and education here. We will enjoy better health and we will be much happier with many more friends. We will be free from bullying and harassment.” (Extract from Health and Happiness website)

Members of Health and Happiness refer to themselves as ‘experts’, meaning expert in their own lives.

Ellie Wolf, project manager explains that Health and Happiness has always been asset based:

“We started with a lot of emphasis on asset based working which was quite unusual at the time. Health and Happiness has always been asset based; though we didn’t always call it that!”

In 2008 Health and Happiness obtained funding from the Big Lottery Fund and Highland Council to develop and independently manage ‘Community Connections’. This way of working was prompted by the experiences of experts who did not feel they were treated as fellow citizens with the same rights and responsibilities as any other citizen. Community Connections aimed to be a practical, action-based initiative giving experts real opportunities to take control of their lives and develop as active citizens. Eight community connectors were appointed to work across the Highlands. Adopting a combined community development and strong person-centred approach, Community Connections aimed to raise the profile of experts in local communities, challenging barriers but also building bridges and forging strategic links across a broad range of organisations, services and agencies.

In 2011, an independent evaluation concluded that “In our view Community Connections is an excellent initiative that does exactly what it says it does. It fits Highland life very well, making best use of limited resources and making some truly creative and effective partnerships to support experts in living productive lives as active full citizens.”

This long history of asset based working in the Highlands has generated numerous examples of people with learning disabilities being actively involved in their communities and, in some instances, taking the lead in developing new projects. Examples include an integrated youth project and the Wildlife Wombles; a group which volunteers in the Highlands wildlife park.

The funding for Community Connections has now ended but NHS Highlands has funded Ellie's post and one other to continue some of the work. The main emphasis now is to get people with learning disabilities involved in local social innovations, including making links with non-learning disability organisations to create opportunities for them. Ellie is quite upbeat about the changes. She notes that although the team of Community Connectors was much bigger and could therefore do more, they were still employed as staff. She sees the current work as a natural progression to people with learning disabilities running things themselves. The main emphasis is on building bridges with partner organisations and creating joint initiatives.

Examples of current work include training and supporting people with learning disabilities to be co-creators including a group of community journalists:

*"The project is called TILIS (Tell it like it is). People's Stories was what started Health and Happiness and they're really important. People with Learning Disabilities have social and cultural lives which are invisible...The project started from the point of asking "what do people want to show?" We want to show the full kaleidoscope of people's lives to blow off people's myths and show the truth. People will be able to tell their own story in their own words they will also capture the stories of others."*

The main focus of the journalism at the moment is peoples' experience of SDS. It is already revealing some important learning:

*"The project has shown that the practicalities of implementing SDS is a challenge and the stories are not always positive but it is important to share both sides."*

The community journalism project has met with some scepticism:

*"Some people who heard about this assumed the journalists wouldn't be writing their own stuff or doing the interviews themselves but they are with support and some adaptations. The community journalists are very strict about the truth, doing justice to what people share and being real."*

The community journalists are paid for their work. They receive training that is aimed at paid employees. They are trained about boundaries and expectations and are given appraisals.

*"Asset based work needs a huge change of perception for the community and for people with learning disabilities themselves."*

Source: Interviews with Ellie Wolf, Health and Happiness Project Manager

One very practical asset which some people with learning disabilities can contribute is finance. C-Change works with a wide range of people, including those with learning disabilities. They were pioneers of individual budgets which they were providing some years prior to the introduction of Self-Directed Support. They therefore have extensive experience of how the practical asset of a budget can be used to benefit the whole community:

*“We provide individualised support in a range of settings; in families, with partners and for people living alone. We work on the basis that the money they get for their support is also an asset, not just to themselves but to the community. We help people to use it as a resource to build resilience, for example, by employing people locally, using local shops and businesses; using their money quite consciously as a local asset. We recruit for the individual from the local community and make a conscious effort to use local facilities wherever possible. This is one way of people being viewed not just as passive recipients of support but offering something into the community.”*

This informant was clear that whilst a person’s financial assets can be used as a resource for the community, they are far from the most important assets people bring. Human relationships are the assets that matter most to most of us.

*“Of course, it’s not just about financial assets; if it’s only about money it can alienate people from the community. It’s important to build connections so that paid assets don’t crowd out other kinds of social capital; friendship, love, families. The most important assets are those you can’t buy.”*

Friendship and love are at the heart of another project supported by C-Change:

## Dates-n-mates

Dates-n-mates is a dating and friendship agency run by and for adults with learning disabilities which helps people make friends and find love. It runs up to six social events each month for its 150 members, anything from creative workshops to inclusive club nights. The events calendar is packed with speed dating, speed meets, LGBT events and trips to the cinema. There are meals out, karaoke, quizzes, bowling, a book club and themed parties.

Finding 'the one' can be a challenge but dates-n-mates runs supported first dates and helps would-be-daters with their confidence, social independence and personal relationship skills. The variety of activities and combination of members-only and 'open' events ensure that people with learning disabilities get the best chance to meet like-minded people who share their interests.

Dates-n- mates started in Glasgow in 2008 as a partnership supported by C-Change with another pilot project set up in Aberdeen in 2015. An evaluation of progress after nine months of the Aberdeen pilot concluded that dates-n-mates was well on its way to achieving its vision of making a significant difference and helping those who are often most isolated from society to connect to each other and to their local communities. It was reported that members were growing in confidence, developing their social skills and have valued social roles thus reducing loneliness and increasing active citizenship amongst people with learning disabilities.

Source: Dates-n-Mates publicity information and evaluation report from the Aberdeen pilot.

The importance of relationships with others is one of the core elements of an asset based approach. But there is wide recognition that, whilst these do happen spontaneously in communities, social connectedness often needs to be nurtured. There are a number of initiatives which seek to do this. For example, Link Up is an Inspiring Scotland programme which is based on the belief that if communities are to achieve change for themselves, relationships between individuals in communities need to be fostered, broadened and deepened. This requires local people to know and trust each other.

## Link up

Link Up is an Inspiring Scotland programme set up in 2012 to invest in, energise and support local communities. It has two interconnected aims:

1. By doing things together and helping each other, individuals build new trusting relationships, helping to enhance their view of themselves and the community they live in;
2. Individuals and communities are more resilient and have greater capacity to address the challenges they face.

Link Up currently operates in nine geographic communities where it works in partnership with a host organisation in each community. These host organisations employ a Link Up worker to engage and work alongside local residents to facilitate activities and projects that they would like to do.

Link Up activities are determined by the people involved in each community. The local Link Up worker works with residents to facilitate activities that bring different groups of people together to participate and contribute on an equal footing. Link Up explicitly uses asset based principles; its starting point is the assets in the area and, in particular, the existing strengths of individuals, families and the community i.e. their experiences, skills, knowledge and interests.

An example provided by Link Up demonstrates their approach: *“Our local Link Up worker was first introduced to Neighbourhood Network’s group in Springburn in October 2015. From this initial meeting we now have two of the group regularly attending The Chancers Community Group. Both ladies are over 50 with mild learning disabilities. The ladies had identified that they would both like to meet new people and learn new skills. The group have really enjoyed having both ladies come along. They have a mutual love of all things ‘crafty’ so this brought about some great initial discussions and skill sharing which really helped everyone to get to know each other. After three months the ladies are as much a part of the group as the longer-term members and they have been involved in a variety of activities.*

*Following further discussions with the Neighbourhood Networks group it was identified that the majority of members would like to be involved in a regular arts & crafts style group. We are currently negotiating suitable times with a venue so that the group can get started. The group will be promoted community wide with Neighbourhood Networks members taking a lead on the arts & crafts activities.”*

Source: interview with Andrew Magowan, Manager of Link up and review of website

Link Up is an example of a place based programme focused on building communities through connecting people. It seeks to be inclusive so, as illustrated above, does include some people with learning disabilities. However, a feature of many such initiatives is that they do not systematically collect information on who gets involved and who does not, so it is difficult to know to what extent people with learning disabilities are part of such projects.

An initiative which started with a focus on people with learning disabilities but which has more recently broadened its remit is Neighbourhood Networks:

## Neighbourhood Networks

Neighbourhood Networks is based on a model called 'Living Support Networks' which offers flexible and responsive support to a group of around nine or ten people who live within a reasonable distance of one another. Each Network is facilitated by a part-time Community Living Worker recruited from the local neighbourhood. At present there are twenty-one networks across the central belt of Scotland. The approach of Neighbourhood Networks emphasises the importance of providing mutual support for vulnerable people who might otherwise receive no support at all.

Neighbourhood Networks were initially set up in North Lanarkshire for people with learning disabilities but more recently they have broadened their criteria to encompass anyone at risk of isolation due to age, sensory impairment, mental ill health or other issues. Network members offer each other mutual support and work with their Community Living Worker to make choices about the things they want to do. Examples of Network activities include a group which was interested in cycling: they applied for funds to set up a cycling group, initially with support but gradually taken over and run by members themselves.

Another group got involved in organising a fashion show in tribute to a member who had recently died; this grew into a much bigger event with £10,000 funding from the Big Lottery Fund. A further example was organising the Festival of Commonwealth which provided lots of opportunities for groups to engage with the wider community.

Neighbourhood Networks describes the benefits as follows:

*"What we have found in our members is that very quickly they feel much more valued with a sense of both pride and responsibility in and for their own Network. As members develop relationships and share their experiences, skills, and strengths, their confidence and self-esteem grows quite naturally.*

*Through the equality of the relationship between Network members and staff and the involvement members have both in the organisation and their community, members feel they have something to give, that they themselves can provide support and not just 'as history would have it' receive support."*

Source: Interview with Adrian McKill, Network Manager and review of website

Another example comes from Central Advocacy Partners who, among other projects, run a community inclusion project in Stirling.

### Central Advocacy Partners: Community Inclusion Project

CAP deliver their Inclusion Project across the Stirling Council area for adults with a learning disability aged 16 years and over. The project is funded by Stirling Council. They work with each individual on their personal outcomes and deliver a three month rolling programme of activities to meet these. They have a different theme for each programme, so they can focus on what group members say is important to help support happy, healthy lives. Previous themes have been 'Staying Safe' and 'Keeping Healthy'.

Activities include learning opportunities, social activities, day trips, music events, healthy walks, cooking classes, opportunities to make new friends and being active in the community. The Inclusion Project offers a fun and safe way to build confidence, meet new friends, create meaningful relationships with others and try new things and places with fantastic peer support.

Elizabeth Findlay, manager of Central Advocacy Partners, gave us this example to illustrate how the programme works:

*"Jane told us that she wanted to lead a more active life. She also told us that she likes animals and would like to volunteer. Staff found out that there is a local dog shelter and after speaking to the manager there, agreed that we could support a group of volunteers to come along and help walk some of the dogs. We put this as an activity in our programme and Jane came along as did other people. Such is the success of this that we now have a regular dog walking session at shelter in our programme; win/win, I think."*

Source: website and information provided by CAP. More information can be found on the Central Advocacy Partners website.

There are many other projects which aim to increase people's connectedness with their communities. Some explicitly aim to include people with learning disabilities alongside other people in order to build inclusion in from the start rather than attempting to 'add in' people with learning disabilities to established projects. Recent examples include those funded by the Scottish Government to promote social connectedness such as Cantray Crew Connects based in Cantraybridge College, Croy and Fit's for Supper in Aberdeen. One such example comes from Cassiltoun Housing Association, which has taken a creative approach to create a welcome for new tenants:

## Cassiltoun Housing Association

Cassiltoun Housing Association evolved in 2004 from Castlemilk East Housing Co-operative. It is the oldest community ownership housing co-operative in Glasgow and is managed by a voluntary Board made up of local people.

Cassiltoun believes that their role is to provide more than just affordable housing. The aim of regeneration is to enable communities that have suffered from economic, social and environmental decline to be able to rebuild their own communities. Their work is concerned with physical, social, environmental and economic matters, such as healthcare, crime prevention and lifelong learning initiatives and the development of skills, training, employment and social enterprise.

One of their projects is the Stables Studio. This began life as a small pilot project in 2009 and has continued to grow with the aim of tackling the social isolation experienced by many older people. The project helps older people learn and develop arts related skills such as drawing and painting and creating jewellery and textiles. Clair Malpas, Cassiltoun's Regeneration Manager, explains that the Stables Studio aims to be run by the people who attend and to be inclusive:

*"We open three days a week and people can do what they want. A creative artist coordinates but the content is determined by participants. The people who attend include some with learning disabilities and there are those with a range of health issues but it's a community resource - it's not tagged as a place for people with health issues - it's for people who live here."*

People with learning disabilities are also included in other projects and activities run by Cassiltoun. This includes a major regeneration of Castlemilk Park and Cathkin Braes, where local people work with a Community Woodlands Officer to run a host of activities.

Cassiltoun Housing Association delivers a Community Growing project. This project is based at Castlemilk Stables and aims to give nursery children the opportunity to grow and nurture plants, learn about composting and also to taste the plants that they grow. The project has developed a group of adult volunteers, including some with learning disabilities, who regularly work on the garden. This part of the project aims to break down social barriers, encourage physical activity and encourage access to local green space.

**Designing a welcome:** Cassiltoun Housing Association are keen to welcome their new tenants as members of the community from the start. Clair Malpas describes one of the ways they have done this:

*"We developed some new properties for people who had been in care; including some people with learning disabilities. We invited them to join the Fab Pad project run by Impact Arts. They usually run this with young people but we asked them to provide a similar project for an older age range; for people about to take up their new tenancies with us. It involved people in planning how they were going*

*to design their new home including: creating mood boards, interior design on a budget, creative ideas for making the places their own. Not only did it make people feel that their new home was really theirs, created by themselves, it also brought a group of people together who were going to be new to the area. They got introduced to the other things that are going on. It made them feel part of the community before they even moved in."*

Source: Interview with Clair Malpas, Regeneration Manager and website.

Several of the informants for this review highlighted the particular challenges of achieving social connectedness if you are someone who has multiple and complex needs. Even inclusive projects do not always include everybody. However, there are examples of people changing the way that things are run in order to include people.

### **Dundee Connections Library**

The Connections library was developed about six years ago as part of a review of the libraries service. The aim was to encourage use of the library by people with additional needs. Neil Paterson, Library and Information Officer, has worked with groups of people with learning disabilities from residential homes, day centres and others in order to create a safe and supportive environment within the library so that people feel more able to use the space on their own. The Connections library host and facilitate groups with additional needs who are involved in various projects, but they have a long term aim for people to progress from coming in a group with support to being able to access the library independently. This has happened in some cases e.g. a group from a local care home now use the service on their own (after about four years). Neil points out that some people have very complex needs and will need continued support but they are still entitled to benefit from the library.

Access to libraries for people with learning disabilities can be challenging. One group comes thirty miles from Perth. Neil has been proactive with this group: he started with a 'my favourite things' project; did a Halloween poem with them and has worked with them to make key rings on a 3D printer. This included one man spelling his name on his own for first time.

Source: Interview with Neil Paterson and additional material sent.

All these examples suggest that there is progress in developing greater inclusion for people with learning disabilities as valued members of communities.

*People with learning disabilities see themselves as equal citizens. They have people in their lives who are not just paid to be there.*

### **PAMIS: Including people through stories**

PAMIS works with children and adults with profound and multiple learning disabilities and their families to try to make sure that they have community opportunities and can enjoy a full life. Their starting point is that: “People with profound and multiple learning disabilities have a great contribution to make, if only we take time and listen to them.” And inclusion is a major strand in the organisation’s ten year strategy.

PAMIS works across a range of local authorities and has bases in five localities. Their national and local influencing agenda is extremely practical. They have identified barriers, found examples of good practice and made recommendations that support inclusion, for example, in relation to invasive medical procedures, flexibility when attending hospital appointments and Changing Places toilets.

However, they also place a special emphasis on communication with individuals and multi-sensory storytelling is a key means of achieving this. Through its ‘The Real Lives: Real Stories Project’ they have developed over fifty personalised multi-sensory stories. The stories were adapted from Chris Fuller’s Bag Books approach . Many are designed to assist young people and their carers to come to terms with difficult and sensitive issues such as menstruation, epilepsy, respite, sexuality, medical interventions and difficult transitions. Others are stories that simply celebrate life: a walk in the country, a day on a farm, attending a wedding or having a canine friend.

Storytelling is a highly inclusive activity and multi-sensory storytelling has been undertaken in schools and community settings to involve children, young people and adults with and without learning disabilities. Currently PAMIS is supporting Tayberry Enterprises to train young adults with learning disabilities to become storytellers.

*“In one village a local man was so inspired by the coming together that he’d witnessed through storytelling that he suggested involving the local carpenter and others in the village to build a storytelling yurt. This is still in progress and has ignited creativity with the possibility of it becoming a partnership project with the local army base.”*

The effectiveness of these approaches has been explored through behavioural analysis and interviews with both family carers and professionals and evaluated by the University of Dundee (report forthcoming).

Source: Interview with Jenny Miller, CEO of PAMIS

But there are still barriers to be overcome:

- Wider inequalities and stigma: people in communities are prone to the same range of attitudes towards people with disabilities as are found in society in general. Negative perceptions and stigma can still be major barriers.

*“The core aspect of responding to marginalised populations is connecting people. We need to be aware of the things that prevent this. One of them is stigma.”*

In addition, the people who take on community leadership roles in place based initiatives tend to be self-selecting; the ones with the passion, commitment and time to get things moving. There is no guarantee that these people will be motivated to include people with learning disabilities without support and encouragement to do so.

*“It can be difficult to take account of the inequalities that exist within communities. Place based approaches can be excluding. A lot depends on the attention that is paid to ensuring that there is equality of opportunity to participate.”*

Where people with learning disabilities are involved in community based activities it is not always easy to determine how active their involvement is: are they simply present or do they play an active role?

The art of the possible - getting to know each other: An example from East Renfrewshire Local Area Co-ordination Team

While the importance of social integration is recognised its complexity is often ignored. When this happens people with learning disabilities along with other people in their community e.g. fellow workers, neighbours and club members can be left to get on with it. Sometimes this works out well, but the experienced LAC team in East Renfrewshire do not like leaving this to chance and prefer a more active approach. They create safe spaces where people can talk through any insecurities they may have about welcoming a person with learning disabilities into their midst. People are given the chance to say e.g. “I’m a bit anxious or embarrassed – I’m not sure what to say or do”. It is an approach that has worked well in helping youngsters with learning difficulties become regular members of various local community groups. Then when people with learning difficulties said they did not feel very welcome at their council run leisure facilities, the LAC team got involved. They worked with the leisure centre and libraries to create work placements for people with learning disabilities and provided staff with values awareness training and opportunities to talk through concerns. This worked out well. People with learning disabilities are now actively involved and the venues and staff are enriched. One of the team described this process as “looking at the assets of the individual and the assets of the community and then figuring out how to marry to two.”

Source: Interview with Dougie Purves, LAC East Renfrewshire

- **Having the right facilitation:** for many people with learning disabilities it is necessary to have some level of facilitation for them to actively participate. This might be personal support, communication tools, transport (a major logistical challenge in many parts of Scotland) and/or simply having a consistent person to welcome you to the activity each week. These do not have to come from formal services, but the appropriate facilitators do have to be identified and often brokered by someone. If they are not put in place or they cease to exist for any reason, participation is unlikely to happen.

One of our informants described the circumstances of some people with autism:

*“There are lots of groups out there but there tends not be the resources to help people with autism to make the links, so people are still excluded. People don’t know anyone who goes to the group, then when they do it’s hard to make sure the same person is always there; consistency of relationships is really important. For some activities it seems to be better as there have been resources put in to sports and drama but more minority interests are not catered for especially in rural areas.”*

### **Creating stepping stones: An example from Inspire**

People with learning disabilities sometimes need stepping stones. Gareth Hasell, LAC with Inspire Aberdeen, points out: *“What people don’t understand is that you can’t take someone who has not left their bedroom for three years and put them into an inclusive thing.”*

Inspire is a large Scottish charity that provides a range of services for people with learning disabilities. Three years ago Inspire in Aberdeen secured a £10,000 grant from SCLD to promote activities for people on a Self-Directed Support Budget. Consultation with groups about what was missing resulted in classes being set up in community centres across Aberdeen. These classes covered a range of activities such as music and arts, sports and independent living skills. These were sponsored for the first term but then participants had to fund it themselves. All but one of the classes are still running.

One of the lessons from this project was that some people with learning disabilities had difficulties actually getting to these classes. In the past they would have been provided with taxis and possibly a support worker but that did not happen anymore. The Inspire LAC workers responded to this need by offering ‘independent travel training’: one-to-one assessment followed by coaching in basic road safety. This meant walking and travelling with people to find out what they can do and then supporting them to develop their capabilities. Then, last year, the team collaborated with a school and worked with seven young

people whose teachers identified as finding it a struggle to travel independently and for whom this was likely to be a barrier to their doing an access course at college. The programme consisted of an initial training course at the school and then individualised work with each young person to help them meet the demands of their own particular travel plans. This was more complicated than it seems because travel arrangements are often disrupted so that youngsters need to be able to deal with the unexpected.

*“One of the biggest kicks I’ve had since doing this job ... I was walking down Union Street with this lad after getting off a bus. He had this huge smile on his face and he said ‘you know I’ve never been walking down Union Street, my dad takes me in the car sometimes; but I never get the bus.’”*

Source: Interview with Gareth Hasell, Local Area Co-ordinator, Aberdeen

- Having the right organisational partnerships and support: Having a clear policy steer has really helped maintain the momentum for many projects and several of our informants talked about the importance of SDS legislation and The keys to life making them feel that they were part of a bigger movement. But it is also vital to have good support ‘from the top’ in individual organisations who have the power to make things happen locally and a willingness from partner organisations to work together in the context of often fierce competition for resources.

*“The key is good partnerships with mutual benefit.”*

- The wider system including funding: A common theme from our interviews with informants was that the success of individual projects is heavily influenced by the wider system in which they are located. An individual project can be highly inclusive, but if it is working within systems and processes which mitigate against inclusion, it becomes an island. Funding and commissioning practices were a recurring theme with people commenting that:

*“Good stuff is often not funded in traditional ways.”*

Indeed, it is striking how many of the examples that feature in this report were set up with short term grant funding of one sort or another and if they manage to continue it is often with the support of charitable or further short term funds. Asset based projects are not alone in struggling to get funding, but considering the current policy encouragement one might expect there to be more asset based initiatives being commissioned. The difficulties do not necessarily derive from a lack of desire on the part of commissioners to have more asset based work. It is more likely to be systems which mitigate against it happening. One of our informants provided an illustration:

*“A local authority we were involved with was really keen to improve services for older people and they wanted local, community based provision. But when they came to commission it they effectively then excluded anyone from bidding apart from the large providers. Things like where they advertised and the amount of time they gave to respond were really difficult for smaller, community based organisations; but what really put them out of the running was the size of population the contract needed to cover. They weren’t commissioning for communities: they wanted the contractor to provide for the whole authority which meant they were going to get the service as usual from one of the usual providers. Basically, commissioners are killing off the kind of services they say they want.”*

## **5.6. Asset based approaches with people as citizens and political actors**

It is common for many people to take their citizenship for granted: to assume that they can choose to vote, to participate in political debate or join a political party if they so wish. For people with learning disabilities there can often be the opposite assumption: that they lack the capacity and/or interest to participate as political beings.

This assumption has been challenged for many years by people with learning disabilities advocating for social and political change via organisations like People First. However, often the focus of these campaigns has (understandably) been on disability rights and related issues. The realisation that people with learning disabilities have wider political interests, that they might care about, for example, the environment, nuclear disarmament or the economy is comparatively new.

A number of initiatives have worked towards stimulating and mobilising people as political actors. Outside the Box (OTB), for example, have run projects for several years to develop people’s interest and knowledge to enable them to vote in elections. They are also working with the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTI) to train and support Voting Champions:

## Voting Champions: an example from Outside the Box and NDTI

There is a shared commitment to Scotland being a country where there is widespread participation in civic society. The First Minister has said she wants the 2016 Scottish Parliament election to be the most inclusive election yet. But some groups of people are not as extensively involved as others in voting and the electoral process, and there is a risk of them not taking part in Scottish Parliament elections. They include people who need extra social care support.

There are several factors contributing to why these groups are less active in voting. Part of it is that people often need support to register and to vote but the organisations and people who deliver social care and support are often not certain what they are able to do.

OTB and NDTI offer a development programme to build capacity among care providers and other organisations around voting and other involvement in the electoral process. Voting Champions builds on the experience of the Our Vote Our Voice project where Outside the Box worked alongside people with learning disabilities to develop peer support resources that help people vote and have a say in their lives. It is a good example of the experience and creativity of people with learning disabilities going on to benefit people in other situations too.

The 2016 programme brings together Voting Champions, who then go on to share what they are learning with colleagues and people receiving support. It aims to raise workers' skills and confidence to have person-centred conversations and work alongside people to support and encourage more people to lead activities that support people to get engaged in discussions and thinking about their voting choices and decisions.

Anne Connor, Chief Executive of OTB, points out that developing the political awareness and activism of people with learning disabilities is not only a good thing in its own right, but can have other benefits in changing people's attitudes:

*"Our Vote Our Voice has been used all over the UK and in other countries. Even in traditional support settings people started to have politics groups; discussing what they've seen on TV and what they think about it. People learn that you can have arguments and still be friends. But the focus on people voting also changes other people's attitudes to people with learning disabilities. They go home and start talking to other people about current affairs. They are citizens who have a say in who runs the country. And that links to having a say in their own lives and the services they use."*

Source: Interview with Anne Connor, CEO Outside the Box and review of website

The referendum about independence in Scotland inspired many people who had been previously politically inactive to get involved. This was also true for many people with learning disabilities.

**“It’s our Scotland just as much as anyone else’s”**

Stronger Together are activist groups for people with learning disabilities who have experience in advocacy. In 2013 they set up a programme to help ensure that people with learning disabilities had the same opportunity as the rest of the voting population to take part in the Scottish referendum. They identified and tackled what mattered. This included providing information in Easy Read formats, getting support from MPs and running workshops that gave people opportunities to participate in discussions about the issues and to explore what they meant to them. These workshops took place all over Scotland and were attended by over 700 people with learning disabilities. There was evidence that following the referendum more people joined political parties. There are now people with learning disabilities who can work for change from inside political parties, who can add their weight to self-advocate and campaigning organisations that are lobbying for change from the outside.

Source: Hood, I. (2016).

People who want to go beyond expressing their opinions and having a vote and move into taking a leadership role in policy making are likely to need support. That is true for everyone, but particularly so for people with learning disabilities. In Control Scotland provides leadership development for disabled people who want to take the next step.

## **In Control Scotland: Partners in Policymaking**

Partners in Policymaking is a leadership development programme designed for disabled adults and parents of disabled children. The overall aim of Partners in Policymaking is to increase social inclusion and achieve social justice. It specifically aims to do this for people who are at risk of social exclusion due to labels of disability.

It achieves this aim by recruiting, educating and training the next generation of leaders. It provides these new leaders with:

- a strong values framework
- a clear and coherent analysis of why things are currently organised the way they are
- a different and expanding vision of what is possible
- many of the tools and skills they need to make change happen for themselves, their own families, their local communities and at a national level.

Source: Review of website.

Political activism can be local as well as national and it can be about changing attitudes at a local level. The Advisory Group (TAG) do this in a variety of ways:

## **The Advisory Group**

The Advisory Group has been going since 1996. It was originally set up by KEY Community Supports to enable people with learning disabilities to have a stronger voice in the services they use and in their local communities. In 2012 The Advisory Group became a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation. It has three main aims: to promote the gifts and talents of people with learning disabilities; to break down the barriers of discrimination; to help make a more inclusive Scotland.

The Advisory Group is an organisation run by people with learning disabilities. It promotes social inclusion and the creation of a Scotland where the gifts and talents of everyone are recognised and every citizen is seen to have equal value in society. They do this through training, consultation, hosting social inclusion events and bringing people together.

There are twelve regional Advisory Groups working across Scotland in Ayrshire, Central, Clyde coast, Dumfries & Galloway, four groups in Glasgow, Dunbartonshire, Highland, South Lanarkshire and Inverclyde.

There are three main strands to TAG's work: Breaking down Barriers; Having your Say and Accessible Information. Examples of TAG's work include an anti-bullying project in schools:

*"One of the big problems facing people with learning disabilities was bullying by school children. Rather than just complaining about this we have designed a disability awareness programme aimed at primary school kids in P4-6. Using the story of the Hunchback of Notre Dame and an interactive football game, members of TAG go into primary schools to talk about what it is like to have a disability and how it doesn't stop you doing the things you want to do. We've had great feedback from over 2000 school children."*

TAG campaigns nationally, working closely with the Learning Disability Alliance Scotland looking at issues like Self Directed Support, benefit changes, Local Authority Charging policy and a host of other national and local policies which affect people with learning disabilities.

Regional TAGs get involved in a number of local campaigns. For example, in Dunbartonshire TAG a major issue was the state of the pavements and how difficult it was for people who use wheel chairs to get off the kerbs and cross the road safely.

Source: TAG's website.

In recent years people with learning disabilities have been more widely engaged in informing policy makers about what matters in their lives and in helping to shape policy. However, on the whole, this engagement rarely goes beyond time-limited consultation on specific issues. We will know progress is being made when people with learning disabilities are involved in developing policy beyond the consultation and are engaged as active participants on issues outside the disability field.

## 6. Conclusions

This review was commissioned to consider the efficacy of asset based approaches for people with learning disabilities and to evidence the impact these approaches can have on people's lives. In this section we summarise what we have learned from the review and consider the implications for policy and practice development.

### 6.1. What does 'asset based approaches' mean?

Asset based approaches are underpinned by some core principles which are fairly widely understood. However, there is no single definition; no 'blueprint' model that can be described.

On the plus side, this fluidity enables asset based approaches to be quite a 'broad church'. People can adopt the principles in a range of settings, and as we have outlined in this review, can apply them in relationships with people as individuals who use support, as members of communities and as political actors. It also avoids the exclusivity that can attach to some models of working, whereby if people are not following every element of the model they are not part of the club.

The disadvantage of this lack of clear definition is that it makes it difficult to assess the extent to which people are actually working in asset based ways; there is no set of criteria one can apply. Consequently, in this review, we have included examples from across a spectrum of asset based approaches. From projects trying to have more asset based conversations with people through to more radical, bottom up, community led change. There are those who would argue that it is only the latter that should be included but that would have a) resulted in a very short report (certainly in respect of people with learning disabilities) and b) contributed to the exclusivity referred to above. A situation where only people who comply with an exact set of criteria can claim an allegiance to asset based working would not in our view be very asset based.

That being said, the absence of clear descriptions of what projects do to be asset based is problematic, particularly when it comes to generating evidence of efficacy.

### 6.2. What is the evidence of impact?

The lack of a clearly defined model of asset based working which can be described, tested and compared with other models makes it difficult to draw conclusions about efficacy. It is therefore unsurprising that our review of the literature came up with very little evidence of impact beyond the anecdotal.

There are two ways of looking at this. On the one hand, you can argue that the values and principles of asset based working are so self-evidently a good thing that they do not need proof of impact. This is a perfectly defensible argument: should we really need evidence to prove that focusing on people's strengths, starting with what they care about and building people's social connectedness are good things? On the other hand, we live in a world where evidence is important to choices about how money gets spent. If we believe that asset based approaches really do have the potential to transform people's lives, then we ought to find ways of evidencing that. And let us not forget the critiques of asset based approaches, in particular, that they may serve to deny people a voice about the injustices in their lives. If that is a risk, we should learn about it through careful evaluation.

One of the striking things which emerged from our review was the absence of good descriptive information about projects working in asset based ways with people with learning disabilities. This is a pity, not just for evaluation but for sharing learning; particularly from short term funded projects.

### **6.3. How do asset based approaches fit within the context of learning disabilities?**

There are other established approaches in the learning disability field which share many asset based principles. Personalisation and local area co-ordination are the obvious ones but the long history of self-advocacy within the learning disability movement also has much in common with asset based principles of community empowerment.

The clearest difference between asset based approaches and these others is the primacy given to the role of communities. Asset based approaches derive from place-based development and, in the final analysis, it is the relationship between people and their local community which is at their heart. Personalisation tends to start from the individual and, if interpreted and implemented in a more asset based way, views the individual in the context of their community; but the individual remains the central focus. Local area co-ordination creates bridges between individuals and communities but, in the main, still starts from the individual. Self-advocacy movements may focus less on the individual but, by and large, their focus is on communities of interest and commonality rather than communities of place.

This does not mean that asset based approaches are not relevant to people with learning disabilities. Indeed, the asset based approach brings a vital message about the importance of communities and viewing people as valuable members of communities and as citizens. It also reinforces the value, practice and outcomes of equality practice. This is not a new message but, in this substantial form, has the potential to help transform ways of working

However, if these approaches are going to be used to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities, they need to be seen in the context of long-standing efforts to advance the personalisation and social integration agendas, not least because their success is likely to be impeded by similar barriers. There are lessons to be learned in both directions. The experience of personalisation shows us that the individual matters. Yes, they are part of their communities, but for their assets to be realised and shared, most individuals require some degree of facilitation. And if you have a learning disability that facilitation may need to be in the shape of services.

### **6.4. Can services be asset based?**

We all have limits to our capabilities for which we need the service of others; whether that be repairing the car, filling a tooth or being helped to get up in the morning. All of these can be experienced as more or less mutually respectful.

We suggest that if asset based approaches are to include people with learning disabilities, then they need to fit alongside services, support systems and initiatives;

not least because the existence of these is a pre-condition for the participation of many people. This applies to the people who are most commonly side-lined: those who also have a diagnosis of autism or who have multiple and complex needs.

Yet throughout this review we have encountered a degree of negativity about 'services'. People have used the term 'service-land' to conjure up an image of a place where you really would not want to go if you had a choice. A place where people use alien language about you and at best offer you a limited menu of support to choose from and, at worst, do things to you without any choice at all. Regrettably, some services are like that. However, some are not and we suggest it may be helpful to focus on what can make services more asset based rather than dismiss them as a lost cause. Some of the examples in this review illustrate how services can add to the assets of individuals and communities provided they are willing and committed to relating to people and doing things differently.

### 6.5. What are the necessary conditions for asset based approaches?

We suggest that there are a number of factors which can facilitate asset based approaches with people with learning disabilities:

- **Addressing wider inequalities and stigma:** Real change in the lives of people with learning disabilities requires shifts in power at every level. The asset based literature and asset based informed practice provide clear examples of how this can happen in the context of interpersonal relationships and evidences the positive impact on the lives and well-being of project participants and staff.
- **People with learning disabilities should be active participants in place based community development:** One way to help this to happen would be for commissioners to require projects to use the inclusion of people with learning disabilities as an indicator of success. Many place-based initiatives seem to have only the vaguest idea of the extent of their inclusion or non-inclusion of people with learning disabilities and this is understandable given the reluctance to apply labels to people. We need to find ways of gauging and improving the extent of inclusion without labelling; a conundrum to be debated.
- **Tackling attitudinal barriers** and challenging the same old ways of doing things and thinking about people. This includes being prepared to challenge attitudes within communities and ask questions about inclusion.
- Allowing people to take risks and avoiding over-protection.
- Ditching assessment, planning and funding systems which focus on deficits and instead ask how can we develop this person's assets?
- Having the right facilitation so that people can actively participate.
- Having the right organisational partnerships and support.
- Addressing the barriers in the wider system including funding and commissioning processes which kill off asset based initiatives.
- Engaging with people as citizens who have more to contribute than their experience of learning disability.

## **6.6. So is there potential to join up the thinking about choice and control for people with learning disability with principles of asset based working?**

The rhetoric of the assets approach in the literature is optimistic and exciting, and there is evidence from our review that projects with this ethos have the potential to positively impact the people involved. However, a critique of asset based approaches, which we believe needs to be considered, is that they can fail to take account of the inequalities between people in communities and have insufficient regard for issues of social justice. For people with learning disabilities who have been persistent victims of inequalities and injustice, this has to be taken seriously. Our review suggests that there are no reasons why the focus of asset based work cannot be broadened to include opportunities for people with learning disabilities to work together, in communities and networks, to address the injustices that are commonplace features in their lives.

Principles of asset based working have great relevance to the lives of people with learning disabilities and may provide a vehicle for creating new ways of doing things. At the same time there is much in common with, and much to be learned from, approaches that are more established within the learning disability field. If personalisation which values and develops the assets of the individual can be combined with place-based initiatives to develop communities ready to receive and share those assets, we may be building bridges to better lives.

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