



Building Bridges to a Good Life

A review of asset based, person centred approaches
and people with learning disabilities in Scotland

Report for SCLD from DMSS Research
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Key Findings

What is the issue?

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?

Aim of the Scoping Exercise

Scottish Commission for Learning Disability commissioned this work 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 work was carried out between November 2015 and March 2016 and involved a desk based review of current evidence, policy and practice, interviews with 40 key informants, a consultation workshop and a mapping of asset based approaches with people with learning disabilities across Scotland.

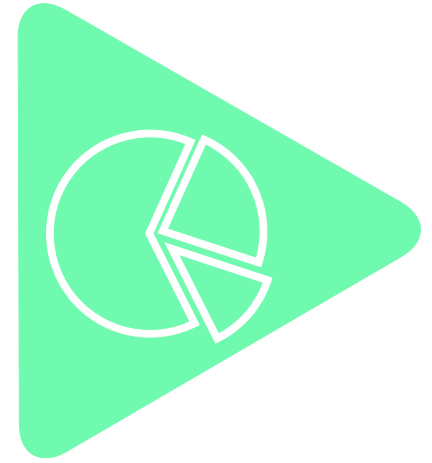


What does the scoping exercise tell us?

Definitions and principles of asset based approaches

While there is no one single model of asset based approaches most focus on a particular community or neighbourhood. However, there are also definitions which suggest that the principles of asset based approaches can be applied to groups of people, communities of interest, and to individuals. Asset based approaches share the following values and principles:

- 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 on 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.



Asset based approaches in the context of learning disabilities

As yet there is very little research exploring the relevance of the asset based approach to people with learning disabilities. However, there are established approaches with people with learning disabilities which are based on some similar principles, notably personalisation and local area co-ordination.

Central tenets of the personalisation agenda such as personalised budgets, person centred planning and self-directed support all have ambitions, principles and values that are similar to those of asset-based working. There is evidence that they can result in demonstrable improvements in the life experiences of people with learning disabilities. Asset based approaches for people with learning disabilities, however, cannot sidestep the issues that have tended to impede the progress of the personalisation agenda. For example, many of the barriers which currently exclude people from accessing person centred planning will also exclude them from participating in communities. Personalisation can also be criticised for placing the focus on the individual without sufficient consideration of their place in their wider community.

Local Area Co-ordination (LAC) 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. 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. LACs can 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.

Advocacy and self-advocacy are also well established ways that people with learning disabilities claim their place in communities and networks.

Links between Asset based working and other paradigms

A core component of the assets 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, learning disability and the field of disability more widely.

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 toward 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.

Asset based approaches emphasise the importance of social connections and the strengths that derive from these. The assets approach, however, largely ignores evidence of the benefits people derive from engaging in social action (e.g. conscious-raising activities, community activism and social movements) that specifically address the injustices in their lives. There is an argument for suggesting that the assets approach should not only sensitise participants to the assets in their lives, communities and networks but enable them to name and challenge their oppressive and unjust experiences.

Inherent to asset based approaches is a recognition of the importance of equality. The assets approach has been criticised, however, for directing attention away from the problems and difficulties created by social inequalities and power relationships which shape the lives of individuals and communities. Asset based approaches can be used to justify cuts in services that some people use to cope with the consequences of these inequalities. It is important that asset based approaches recognise inequalities and have an understanding of the systems and processes which sustain power dynamics.

Evidence of the benefits of asset based approaches

Supporting, enabling and empowering participants to realise their potential is a central theme in the assets literature and is reflected in the methods asset based projects use such as asset mapping, appreciative inquiry, participatory appraisal and co-production. The potential rewards of being involved in an asset based project include: being treated as a person first, enriched social networks, more opportunities as well as improvements in status, control and a sense of belonging. However, there is little published work that describes 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.

There is a lack of evidence from the literature to suggest that the assets 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. This is not to 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 important that asset-based approaches do not divert attention from the structural factors underlying the social determinants of health for people with learning disabilities.

Asset based approaches and local areas

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 more aware of the concepts than elsewhere. 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.

Asset based approaches and inclusion

There are many examples of projects which offer people an opportunity to share their interests and develop their talents (artistic, musical, sporting, gardening or any other activity) regardless of their background or identity. However, there is still a tendency for these to be provided in non-inclusive settings i.e. through specialist projects. The degree to which there is greater inclusion of people with learning disabilities in mainstream activities is difficult to monitor but anecdotal evidence suggest that it remains variable, though improving.

Asset based approaches with people who work or volunteer

Employment is central to social inclusion and the well-being people with learning disabilities. However, in the context of limited employment opportunities, people with learning disabilities face increasing barriers to work. 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. Not all employment projects are founded on asset based principles. Some present themselves as providing meaningful work experience and training but are in reality 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.

Asset based approaches for people who use support

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. For example what their connections are, what gifts they have to offer and what resources may exist in the community to enrich their lives.

Common barriers identified were:

- Attitudes and habitual deficit-based ways of working;
- Risk aversion and over protection preventing people from making choices;
- Not enough staff time;
- Assessment, planning and funding systems which are still needs and deficits focused;
- Service providers with vested interests (Having people dependent on services can be an effective business strategy for some).

Asset based working with people as part of communities

The extent to which people with learning disabilities are included in community initiatives varies and is difficult to monitor. Most community groups don't record who gets involved or the extent of their participation. A number of projects aim to increase people's connectedness with their communities and some explicitly include people with learning disabilities alongside others in order to build inclusion in from the start. These examples suggest that there is progress in developing greater inclusion for people with learning disabilities as valued members of communities. But there are still barriers such as wider inequalities and stigma, having the right facilitation, having the right organisational partnerships and support, and the wider system including funding.

Asset based approaches with people as citizens and political actors

People with learning disabilities have challenged the assumption that they lack the capacity and/or interest to participate as political beings through advocating for social and political change via organisations like People First. The realisation that people with learning disabilities have political interests wider than disability rights, however, is comparatively new. There are a number of initiatives which aim to stimulate and mobilise people as political actors. It is important to recognise, however, that opportunities to access the information, support and skills development to do this are less common for people with learning disabilities. It is important to consider what additional capacity building might be needed if people are to develop into those roles.

What has been shown to work?

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.

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 assets literature and assets 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. However, 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.



Moving forward

The rhetoric of the assets approach in the literature is optimistic and exciting, and there is evidence from this exercise that projects with this ethos have the potential to positively impact the people involved. However, a critique of asset based approaches, which 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. This exercise suggests that there are no reasons why the focus of assets 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.

The lack of a clearly defined model of asset based makes it difficult to draw conclusions about efficacy. The clearest difference between asset-based approaches and others such as personalisation is the primacy given to the relationship between people and their local community. Personalisation if interpreted and implemented in an 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. The assets 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.

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 as their success is likely to be impeded by similar barriers. 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 exercise has shown that the 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 good lives.