



In partnership with



# Becoming strengths-based

## Overview of key ideas and principles

**Let's end homelessness together**

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# Becoming strengths-based

## Overview of key ideas and principles

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### Produced by

The Homeless Link National Practice Team in partnership with Inspire Chilli and Expert Link.

### With thanks to

Expert Link's network and all of the many services, and people accessing services, who contributed to this toolkit, as well as the John Laing Charitable Trust who are funding this work.

## Introduction to the toolkit

Most people know the basics of a strengths-based or asset-based approach<sup>1</sup>; instead of looking at someone's deficits (such as their 'problems' and what is 'wrong' in their lives) we focus on their strengths (what they are good at, their positive social networks and what they would like to achieve). While that is definitely at the core of the approach, there is a lot more to becoming strengths-based than just asking about strengths and goals.

As a starting point, being strengths-based involves building an equal and trusting relationship. It requires you to listen more deeply and take longer to understand one another in order to develop the trust needed for someone to share their most deeply held hopes and dreams. It involves helping someone to unlock their own self-esteem so that they believe in themselves enough to step forwards. It is about having the freedom to break away from the narrow confines of referring people to the usual agencies for support and moving towards brokering new opportunities that neither of you have explored before. This is about being an equal partner in a process without knowing exactly where it will lead. It is truly person-led work and it cannot look the same for two different people.

There are many excellent services in our sector but the underlying ethos is often one of 'fixing' people and the issues that we (and wider society) have identified as problematic. Being strengths-based turns that on its head. Strengths-based services work alongside people; finding out what they want and how they want to live.

Being strengths-based is a sea change in our approach. For some it will be intuitive but for others it may require a significant shift in mind-set and practice. However, as you will see in the course of this toolkit, becoming fully strengths-based is revolutionary and transformative. If we aim for everyone to reach their potential and lead a positive fulfilled life, then this is where we need to start.

Strengths-based approaches have become a popular concept within the homelessness sector; many people and services are attracted to the idea of working in a positive way. However, there can be a lack of clarity about what exactly is involved and how this way of working can be practically implemented. This toolkit offers a starting point to becoming strengths-based, as well as a point of return to continue assessing your progress towards working in a truly strengths-based way.

### About the toolkit

As well as the way services are provided, working in a strengths-based way has implications for how we commission and lead services. This toolkit aims to inspire and support organisations and commissioners wanting to apply strengths-based principles.

The toolkit will be comprised of multiple sections. This first section aims to provide clarity about what it means to be strengths-based and some of the principles underpinning the approach. Future sections will include a guide to implementing this way of working, and illustrative case studies and examples from practice. It is not designed as a comprehensive blueprint but more as a collection of tools and information. We are continually learning and aim to revise and improve this document as time goes on. Please get in touch if you have any comments or ideas that can help: [Vicky.Album@homelesslink.org.uk](mailto:Vicky.Album@homelesslink.org.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> we're using the terms interchangeably here but acknowledge that some people use them to mean slightly different things

### How this toolkit was put together

This section of the toolkit was created in partnership with Expert Link, a national peer-led organisation championing the voice of people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages and Inspire Chilli, a training and development agency with specific expertise in supporting and evaluating asset-based approaches.

It is also the product of much wider collaboration and brings together learning from a number of contributing colleagues and partners. The project has held one-to-one conversations, round tables, panel meetings, discussion groups and communities of practice with people with lived experience of homelessness, those working in the sector and those commissioning services. The toolkit also draws upon the extensive learning and research into this topic from other sectors.

### Setting the context

Before describing what it means to be strengths-based, it is important to set the context within which we are writing.

1. There is no single cause of homelessness. There are often a number of complex factors at play in someone's life that can make them more vulnerable to becoming homeless. Structural issues, such as poverty, low income, high accommodation costs and inadequate welfare support put people under constant and building pressure. Under these conditions, a change in personal circumstances, such as a job loss, relationship breakdown or health issue can push people over the edge into homelessness. Ultimately, homelessness is caused by injustice; an unequal society and unequal life chances within it.
2. Becoming strengths-based, or adopting any other kind of approach, is not a silver bullet. However, the way that we choose to work can be a first step towards addressing the elements that are within our control. We can treat people with respect and as equal partners who have, and have a right to, hopes and potential for a positive future. We can ensure that people experiencing homelessness are as much a part of the wider community as any other community member, with the ability to contribute to it and enjoy it. We can ensure that our services are working towards a fairer society in which homelessness is not normalised or accepted.
3. In recent years we have seen the introduction of a raft of new approaches that at Homeless Link we have sometimes called 'Positive Approaches'<sup>2</sup>. Psychologically Informed Environments, Trauma Informed Care and Housing First are three examples. Co-production is also closely linked and is a key element of being strengths-based in addition to being strengths-based in itself. It is not our intention here to ask organisations to leave those approaches behind and become strengths-based instead. These approaches are interlinked and complement each other. Being strengths-based is a key element of other approaches so a more detailed understanding will enhance rather than replace them. Other organisations, who haven't adopted these approaches, may wish to become strengths-based as an approach in itself or apply it to alongside other ways of working.
4. This toolkit requires the reader to reflect seriously on their own practice and that of other services they know or have experienced. This can be a painful process, especially when we question work that we have

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/blogs/2018/sep/26/positive-approaches#:~:text=In%20recent%20years%20our%20well,working%20to%20name%20a%20few.>

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undertaken with so much passion and commitment. We are not discounting the fantastic and dedicated work that has taken place in this sector over many years but propose a different way forwards which involves re-examining what has come before. Every day we ask the people who access our services to examine their lives and make difficult and painful changes. We can't shy away from turning the same lens onto our own work.

## Why be strengths-based?

At the most basic level, it makes sense to listen to the people that we are working with. We have a tendency to view the challenges people are facing from the outside looking inwards. We identify a problem, design a solution (sometimes grounded in solid research) and then apply it. But what if we're solving the wrong 'problem' and what if what is actually needed is different to the solution on offer? There are numerous examples of services designing complex solutions to simple issues because they didn't listen to the people involved. At every level, from service design to individual interactions, we need to listen to the people we are working with and change how we respond accordingly.

A good example of this is Housing First. For many years, the established wisdom was that some people were 'too entrenched' in homelessness or had support needs that were 'too complex' to live in their own independent home. The system stressed the need to first go through a series of steps, from emergency accommodation to supported hostels to semi-independent living, to learn living skills and prove the ability to live independently. Many people had expressed repeatedly that they did not want hostel accommodation but wanted a stable place with their own front door. These requests were frequently ignored. When we finally started listening and supporting people into their own properties without requiring them to jump through hoops, people who had lived on the streets for many years came inside and successfully maintained their homes. Things that we think are impossible can happen when we listen and take on board what people are telling us<sup>3</sup>.

We also need to recognise that we are working within a complex system of agencies and organisations that isn't always able to respond flexibly and in the way that is needed. As Hilary Cottam points out in *Radical Help*<sup>4</sup>, the basic structures of local authorities, healthcare and welfare benefits systems have changed relatively little since they were first designed. Cottam argues that our systems are designed on a basic industrial model which is to identify a problem and to fix it; the patient comes into hospital, is diagnosed, takes medicine prescribed by a doctor and leaves in good health. However, the healthcare challenges we now face, such as diabetes, are more nuanced and require different approaches to bring about broader lifestyle change.

The same could be said of the way we commission and structure the systems within which we support people experiencing homelessness. We try to design solutions at a large scale from the top, but we are actually working to support individuals with unique circumstances. Whilst we want to make sure that much-needed facilities and services are available, we also need to ensure that they are flexible enough for each person to forge their own path through them as needed. Whilst there has been good work in the past, it is clear that the way we have previously done things hasn't always been successful. If we want to give people the opportunity to recover and move on from homelessness we have to do things differently. It makes sense to re-shape service offers around the requests and goals of individuals accessing them.

On a more psychological level, being strengths-based is key to supporting recovery from trauma. We know that homelessness is traumatic; it usually results from a series of adverse experiences that usually involves a loss of control over your own situation<sup>5</sup>. In many cases people have also experienced trauma and adversity before

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<sup>3</sup> Watch this interview with Dr Sam Tsemberis who founded the Housing First approach:

<https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/discussion-dr-sam-tsemberis>

<sup>4</sup> Cottam, H. (2019) *Radical help - how we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state*. Virago. London

<sup>5</sup> Goodman, L. A., Saxe, L., & Harvey, M. (1991). Homelessness as psychological trauma: Broadening perspectives. *American Psychologist*, 46(11), 1219–1225

becoming homeless<sup>67</sup>. As a sector we have put considerable focus in recent years on gaining a better understanding of the impact of trauma through the application of well-known practice models including Trauma Informed Care and Psychologically Informed Environments. This learning has been invaluable, however we need to ensure we are putting equal efforts into supporting recovery. The purpose of Trauma Informed Care isn't to label people or to put a focus on their most challenging experience – it is to ensure that we create environments in which people are understood holistically and in which they can thrive.

Most guides on Trauma Informed Care specifically identify strengths-based approaches as key to recovery<sup>8</sup>. They identify the importance of focusing on the strengths and skills that the individual possesses and on their ability to be resilient and work towards their own recovery. There are several aspects that connect strengths-based work with healing from trauma. One significant element is regaining a sense of control over your life. This means being listened to, heard and believed, having choice and the ability to make decisions and being an equal partner in any services or treatment that you seek or receive<sup>9</sup>.

One of the leading institutions in defining Trauma Informed Care, SAMSHA, has identified the following elements in services promoting recovery:

1. Creating physical and emotional safety.
2. Trustworthiness and transparency in how organisational operations and decisions are made with the goal of creating a high sense of trust.
3. Peer support from others with shared lived experience.
4. Collaboration and mutuality in how services are run with an emphasis on levelling power between staff and clients.
5. Empowerment, voice and choice with both those using services and those working within them recognising individual strengths and experiences.
6. Cultural, historical and gender issues: moving past stereotypes and ensuring responses fit the cultural or other specific needs of the individual.<sup>10</sup>

These elements have a great deal in common with the principles of being strengths-based and re-designing service delivery to place these concepts at its heart is transformative.

Another essential element of recovery is developing resilience. Research has consistently shown that most people who experience trauma (especially childhood trauma) overcome adversity and lead full lives<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Bramley, G., Fitzpatrick, S., Edwards, J., Ford, D., Johnsen, S., Sosenko, F and Watkins, D. Hard Edges: Mapping Severe and Multiple Disadvantage in England, January 2015 accessed <https://lankellychase.org.uk/resources/publications/hard-edges/>

<sup>7</sup> Hopper, E, Bassuk, E & Olivet, J (2010). *Shelter from the storm: trauma-informed care in homelessness service settings*. The Open Health Services and Policy Journal. Vol 13 (2).

<sup>8</sup> Hopper, E, Bassuk, E & Olivet, J (2010). *Shelter from the storm: trauma-informed care in homelessness service settings*. The Open Health Services and Policy Journal. Vol 13 (2).

<sup>9</sup> Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence - from domestic abuse to political power*. BasicBooks. New York

<sup>10</sup> Samhsa (2014) *Samhsa's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*. [https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA\\_Trauma.pdf](https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Benard, B. (1991). *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community*. Portland, OR: Western Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities.

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This has shifted attention towards what might have helped those who recovered. A large body of research into this identifies three key protective factors that enable resilience; caring relationships (involving compassion, respect, trust and listening), maintaining high expectations (including looking for strengths or assets) and providing opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution in the community.<sup>121314</sup> Re-focusing attention on listening relationships, strengths, re-building confidence and inspiring involvement are central to working in a strengths-based way and developing resilience.

Establishing and sustaining positive support networks is also essential to recovery and is identified in research on both resilience and trauma recovery. These positive networks help us through hard times and provide us with positive activities and experiences. In order to lead full lives, we all need to develop positive social networks and build up a life filled with activities that are meaningful to us. Being strengths-based enables this further, firstly by supporting people to identify their positive social networks and further develop those relationships, and secondly, by supporting people to develop new relationships through accessing activities within the community that match their interests. Both of these helps to build greater resilience for the future.

Ultimately being strengths-based can be transformative for services and more significantly, the people who access them. Individuals can achieve things that were previously thought impossible; maintaining stable housing, starting work or volunteering and leading happy lives.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Benard, B. and Truebridge, S. A Shift in Thinking: influencing social workers' beliefs about individual and family resilience in an effort to enhance well-being and success for all in Saleebey, D. (ed)(2013) *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice*, Sixth Edition, Pearson, New Jersey.

<sup>14</sup> Benard, B. *The Foundations of the Resiliency Network*. <https://www.resiliency.com/free-articles-resources/the-foundations-of-the-resiliency-framework/> accessed on 07/02/2021



## What does it mean to be strengths-based?

### Defining a strengths-based approach

A strengths-based approach is a way of working that focuses on peoples' strengths, skills and goals. It shapes everything we do; from how we interact with people to the types of support and services that are offered. It is grounded in building relationships and working alongside people so that they can identify and develop their assets and reach the goals they want to achieve. It involves a deep level of listening and a different way of working in order to activate the strengths of individuals, networks and communities. It redefines the focus of services and changes organisations from the inside out.

Strengths-based working is a broad approach that involves a number of different elements and as such it is not possible to summarise it in a single sentence. Rather than using a single definition, most of those writing about it describe a set of ideas or principles. Our themes and the principles that go with them are outlined and discussed below.

We have chosen to use the term 'strengths-based' in this toolkit as an umbrella term that covers approaches that are described as either strengths-based or asset-based. There is a range of different applications of asset-based or strengths-based work. This includes widely used approaches such as [Advantaged Thinking](#) as developed by the [Foyer Federation](#) in association with Colin Falconer of [Inspire Chilli](#) and the Personal Transitions [Services](#) developed by [Mayday Trust](#) and used by their partners. Strengths-based is one of the principles of [Housing First](#) as well as being a key element of Trauma-informed care and co-production. The strengths-based approach that we are describing here broadly covers all of these approaches.

We also use the terms strengths and assets interchangeably; whilst there are theoretical differences between the two, our general understanding of both terms is that they include strengths, abilities, aspirations, social networks and community and other resources. These strengths or assets exist at every level including the individual, social group, organisation and community.

### The themes and principles of being strengths-based

Based on research, consultation and collaboration, we have developed a series of themes and principles that describe strengths-based working. These can be used to understand what it means to be strengths-based.

### The four themes of strengths-based working

There are 4 key themes of strengths-based practice: strengths, relationships, consistency and community. Underneath these themes are grouped 10 principles. You can see these in the diagram below.

You can also [view our animation](#) that outlines these four key themes in action through the story of Jade.



**THEMES**

**STRENGTHS**

WE FOCUS ON STRENGTHS, POTENTIAL AND GOALS

**RELATIONSHIPS**

BUILDING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS IS OUR KEY PRIORITY

**CONSISTENCY**

EVERYTHING ABOUT OUR ORGANISATION REFLECTS OUR COMMITMENT TO A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

**COMMUNITY**

WE PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE WIDER COMMUNITY

**PRINCIPLES**

1. We believe that every person has strengths and the potential to lead a positive, fulfilled life.
2. The best way for people to reach their potential is to focus on their strengths, interests and goals.

3. We prioritise building equal relationships built on trust and listening.
4. We are person-led and work alongside people in partnership to foster confidence, independence and capability.
5. We recognise the importance of people having positive social connections.

6. Our values are reflected in every part of our organisation including our service delivery, structures, governance, policies and procedures and administrative functions.
7. Continual reflection on every part of our organisation, including the language we use, is a core part of our work.
8. Our organisation is run with, and led by, the people who access it as equal partners with staff and managers.

9. We know that people thrive when they are part of a wider community and we actively encourage participation within it.
10. We work actively to promote strengths-based working and create fairer opportunities for people to live to their potential.

## STRENGTHS: We focus on strengths, potential and goals

- |  |
|--|
| 1. We believe that every person has strengths and the potential to lead a positive fulfilled life.       |
| 2. The best way for people to reach their potential is to focus on their strengths, interests and goals. |

The best-known feature of being strengths-based is a focus on strengths, potential and goals instead of a focus on challenges and problem resolution. This does not mean that we should stop responding to identified areas of need, but that we should shift our focus to strengths and potential.

### 1. We believe that every person has strengths and the potential to lead a positive, fulfilled life

Being strengths-based represents a shift away from focusing on a person's 'deficits' towards focusing on their strengths or assets. The starting point for this is to truly believe in the strengths and potential of every single person, including those who seem furthest from recovery. This belief can sometimes get lost amidst the day-to-day practicalities of providing support, especially within services that are designed and commissioned to focus on pre-identified challenges. The key to being strengths-based is to keep this belief front and centre in the work.

*"Instead of what's wrong with you, it's what's right with you"<sup>15</sup>*

Being strengths-based also involves a genuine and deeply held belief in each person's future and in their ability to live a fulfilled life, including those going through the most difficult periods. It requires a belief in true potential; not just the expectation that people will move forwards a little, but that they have the ability to lead fully functioning, happy lives that are meaningful for them.

#### What have we done previously?

Believing in people is not exclusive to strengths-based work and this resonates with many in the sector already. However, most services primary aim is to resolve specific such as homelessness, health or substance misuse needs. As such, we tend to start the working relationship by identifying and focusing on these areas.

Over time, services have developed referral pathways both for housing and for other activities. This can mean that work is framed around being referred to a hostel or attending a drugs service rather than looking beyond the current situation and into the future.

#### What is the impact of this?

As a result of this, support relationships may be centred around what an individual is perceived to lack, or the problems they are perceived to face. This can be demoralising and impact feelings of capability and self-worth. In some examples, individuals have been observed to identify themselves through assessment terms ("I can't do that, I'm complex needs"). This process means that an individual's own skills, and ideas about what they need, have less importance than the system or process.

Many workers view the people accessing services with compassion and positivity and enjoy getting to know them. However a belief in potential and an interest in their skills and assets can move down the priority list as

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<sup>15</sup> Quote from one of our attendees at a discussion with Experts by Experience.

a result of the way services and systems work. Identifying and working with an individual's strengths can become an optional extra rather than the key focus of the work.

### **How is being strengths-based different?**

Being strengths-based is about prioritising getting to know who a person is and allowing space for them to identify strengths, interests and goals. Rather than asking pre-defined questions, it is about opening up a conversation which enables you to hear the person's own insight and perspective on their experiences and needs. As Stephanie Covington has written, "this strengths-based approach requires seeing...[people]...as possessing the strengths and skills necessary for their healing and transformation processes."<sup>16</sup>

Strengths-based working requires a belief in true potential; not just a few steps forwards but seeing that person leading life in the fullest sense – healthy, happy, and participating in activities or work that they enjoy and is meaningful to them. This is not about being unrealistic. Life has challenges for all of us but those who find themselves requiring services have as much right as anyone else to aim for the things they truly want. It also involves recognising the role services have in supporting or hindering this way of thinking. When we view people in a strengths-based way, their own self-esteem can begin to grow.

Fundamentally, being strengths-based requires the practitioner, organisation, funder and commissioner to have genuine belief in the strengths and potential of every single person accessing a service. This belief is essential and will impact every interaction and decision that is made within an organisation or system. It informs how the organisation chooses to get to know the person and the type of information that is sought. It influences the steps that the individual and staff choose to take together, as well as the direction of the organisation. At its heart, it is about holding a fundamental belief in the individual before they may even believe it themselves.

## **2. The best way for people to reach their potential is to focus on their strengths, interests and goals**

Being strengths-based involves identifying strengths and interests and working towards goals that are identified by the individual themselves. This could be anything from wanting to live in their own flat to pursuing an art degree or even the ambition of flying a plane. The role of the service is to provide an environment in which both the individual, and those working alongside them, are able to identify their strengths and interests and can step towards their goals.

### **What have we done previously?**

Traditional support follows a clear pattern of identifying needs and risks through an assessment process followed by the creation of support and risk management plans to address them. Soon after meeting someone new, most services undertake a needs and risk assessment to find out more about the challenges faced and to offer support, or make referrals, to help address them. Whilst not all assessment processes focus exclusively on support needs and risks, most give considerable attention to identifying the things that are adversely impacting a person's life.

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<sup>16</sup> Covington, S. and Fedock, G. IN PRESS "Strengths-based Approaches to the Treatment of Female Offenders." *The Wiley Handbook of Offender Desistance from Aggression and Crime: Theory, Research, and Evidence-Based Practice*. Edited by C. Langton and J. Worling. United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons. <https://www.stephaniecovington.com/assets/files/8-30-18 Revised Fedock Covington with suggested edits 8 30 2018.pdf>

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As such we tend to focus in the first instance on negative events and challenges. There is a tendency to emphasise events (such as homelessness) and pathology (such as health challenges) over getting to know the person as a whole.

Assessment forms rarely ask about personality traits and talents in any real detail. For many people accessing services, these types of assessments and the dynamic of informing a provider of “faults”, has become so familiar that it can be difficult to re-frame this and to think about aspirations and strengths.

Support plans usually involve actions such as being referred to a drug service or registering with a GP. They may also include goals such as applying for courses or jobs, or getting involved in activities a person has shown an interest in. The objectives are often set by commissioners or funders who want the service to achieve specific outputs or outcomes. The support is usually led by the worker who reviews it regularly to monitor whether the identified actions have been completed.

Most services place minimal focus on individual potential, instead directing most efforts towards traditional and pre-defined outcomes (such as attending GP appointments, making progress with substance use or moving on into the next stage of the accommodation pathway). Even when the list of outcomes is broadened to include interests, training or work, people may be directed to services and experiences already well known to the organisation.

### **What is the impact of this?**

The tone of most traditional assessments and support plans is set by the service rather than the person using it, and the focus is usually on a relatively narrow range of outcomes. Even if the assessment process includes discussion of strengths and aspirations, the structured nature of the conversation will not enable everyone to think beyond typical themes. This process is usually as familiar to people using services as it is to staff. Even with the best intentions, it is not easy to truly identify strengths and goals during a conversation that has been defined by an assessment focused on traumatic events and challenges.

Working towards objectives, framed by the service offer, is unlikely to inspire people to make changes. As a result, many do not meet the goals identified in their support plans, and even when they do, it may not mean moving forwards meaningfully. Attending an appointment at a drugs service is not the same as being inspired to move towards a more positive life that may involve becoming drug free.

### **How is being strengths-based different?**

Being strengths-based is different because the starting point for the service offer is the goals of the individual being supported, and the aim of the service is to support them to reach them. As a consequence, the service offer varies for each person; their goals will be different and often outside the “menu” of options previously provided. Strengths-based services are designed to be flexible and capable of supporting people to access opportunities and experiences for themselves.

It will not always be easy for someone to identify their own strengths and goals. For this reason, staff need to be able to have different types of conversations. By developing a relationship which enables more open conversations, a social environment is created in which the person using the service is able to reflect more openly on their interests and hopes and how the service can support them to achieve that.

## RELATIONSHIPS: building good relationships is our key priority

4. We prioritise building equal relationships built on trust and listening.
5. We are person-led and work alongside people in partnership to foster confidence, independence and capability.
6. We recognise the importance of people having positive social connections.

### 3. We prioritise building good relationships based on trust and listening.

In order to work alongside people and support them to identify strengths and goals, we need to build strong relationships. These relationships focus on getting to know the person on their own terms rather than asking them a standard series of questions.

#### What have we done previously?

As discussed above, most services base their initial conversations around a standard assessment form which guides the interaction but also sets the parameters of the support provided. Many services are full of excellent staff who work hard to build relationships when doing this. However, the structure of the relationship is often defined by the process; assessment, support planning and support meetings.

It is essential to recognise the balance of power in any relationship. Service providers are unavoidably in a position of power because they hold the key to accessing housing, basic provisions and other support. There are various ways that, often unconsciously, staff hold onto this power. This can be subtle, such as sitting behind a desk, structuring conversations around paperwork or asking intrusive questions without acknowledging what that might mean for someone. Sometimes the power imbalance can be demonstrated more clearly such as by refusing to make referrals to other services, issuing warnings or exclusions, or refusing to make someone a hot drink or snack outside of normal dining hours.

#### What is the impact of this?

Whilst many workers build positive relationships with the people they support, the relationship can be structured in a way which make it difficult to build a deeper rapport and prevents people from talking about their true interests. In some cases people may not raise the issues that are of true importance to them because they are not asked. An unacknowledged and reinforced power imbalance can re-traumatise people; impacting their sense of emotional and physical safety and the autonomy they feel they have over their own lives.

#### How is being strengths-based different?

Strengths-based work requires a relationship to be founded on trust and listening: two people sitting together and getting to know one another as equal partners. By starting a relationship this way, it is more likely that the things of importance to each individual is identified. A person may well choose to talk about challenges they are facing, partly because years of accessing services has taught them that this is expected, but also because those things may be at the forefront of their minds. However, if these things aren't raised, a strengths-based worker will not ask. This balances out power in the relationship because the individual is in control of what information they choose to share.

A strengths-based relationship is more like that of a coach who encourages the person to talk about things important to them and who supports them to explore ideas and how to put them into action. This relationship

takes time to build and developing a plan may take many weeks depending on the person. It may also change significantly as the relationship develops.

By listening, building a relationship of trust and adopting a coaching approach, staff and those they support work together to identify goals and how to reach them. It is well established that when working in a psychologically-informed way, relationships are the key tool for change<sup>17</sup>. The relationships built using a strength-based approach are deeply personal and grounded in a clear understanding of the person you are working alongside. This does not mean there are no professional boundaries. Strengths-based relationships are honest, warm and supportive with creative and motivational staff who are confident to discuss different topics and ideas.

#### **4. We work in partnership with people to foster confidence, independence and capability.**

Being strengths-based involves working alongside people as equal partners. The aim is to build confidence but also to develop and support independence and capability.

##### **What have we done in the past?**

Whilst all services are different it is fair to say that many inherently do things ‘for’ people rather than with them. There can be excellent motives behind this – it is a positive instinct to want to help and when we see someone going through a difficult time we want to make things as easy as possible for them. It feels kind to set up a person’s benefits when we know how hard it is, or complete a lengthy referral form so they don’t have to. We can even help people avoid huge challenges, like eviction, by writing letters and advocating on their behalf. People often appreciate this and are grateful but it doesn’t enable them to develop the capability, skills and confidence to do it themselves (or show them that they already have these skills).

Sometimes staff can be concerned about sharing their knowledge and information with the people they work with; worried about making people feel stressed or depressed by understanding their limited housing options or the few job opportunities in their chosen field.

##### **What is the impact of this?**

All of this can lead people to be dependent on services or support, having not developed the skills to do things themselves. Doing things for people prevents them from building confidence because it reinforces the idea that they are unable to. Whilst we cannot promise that anyone’s dreams will come true, we can enable them to take steps towards them, trusting them to understand the limits (and how to break through them where possible).

##### **How is being strengths-based different?**

If we want people to thrive we need to work alongside them to develop their own capabilities; seeing ourselves as an equal partner in the support relationship. This means encouraging people to do things for themselves and providing support when requested. It is about trusting people with the information they need to make decisions. For example, we can support the dream of living in a particular location whilst also sharing the information we have on the options available to them, which may be limited. We treat people like equal partners who have as much understanding as anyone else.

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<sup>17</sup> Keats, Helen, Maguire, Nick, Johnson, Robin and Cockersall, Peter (2012) *Psychologically informed services for homeless people* (Good Practice Guide) Southampton, GB. Communities and Local Government

We also need to allow people to make, what we might see as, mistakes or risky decisions because we learn from our choices and mistakes. It is our role to support, coach, and help someone to think through a decision but not to make it on their behalf.

### 5. We recognise the importance of people having positive social connection

Humans are social animals. Friends, family and community are an essential part of leading a positive life. We rely on them when times are tough and we celebrate with them when things go well. They are a source of companionship and fun. Developing positive social connections is an important part of a happy life.

#### What have we done in the past?

Most of us are aware of the importance of positive relationships. People inevitably make connections when accessing a service often with other people who attend at the same time. When people are having similar tough times these relationships can be positive and provide companionship but if the organisation is not working towards aspirations and goals, it can also serve to maintain people in challenging scenarios.

Many organisations also run activity sessions, peer support groups or co-production initiatives. These can be positive environments where people can make supportive connections with others whilst they all build their self-esteem and take part in positive activities. Few organisations look beyond the sector they are in with the aim of building relationships within the broader community. We have a tendency to refer people to activities aimed at people in a particular situation (homelessness, substance use etc) rather than to generic activities in the community. However, as will be discussed later, building relationships with people leading other types of lives is important

In most organisations there are opportunities to meet others but developing a positive social life or mixing with the local community is rarely an explicit aim.

#### What is the impact of this?

If people only make connections with others who are stuck in a negative situation, it can be hard to move on. People are inspired when they see other people who have made progress in their lives. It can help develop self-esteem to see others who have succeeded. Taking part in positive activities and being valued by the organisation when undertaking co-production are also extremely positive ways that people can make the connections that support them as they move into the next phase of their lives.

Similarly meeting people within the broader community helps to forge links with people from different walks of life. These relationships not only provide support and companionship but also allow people to introduce one another to new ideas and activities. They enable people to feel that they belong within a local community and this can have a positive impact on their ability to move forwards into positive lives.

#### How is being strengths-based different?

Many organisations are already providing the means to make positive social connections. Being strengths-based involves being explicit about the aim to develop these in a few key ways. Peer support is important for building confidence and inspiring self-belief and organisations can introduce this both by establishing volunteering routes for people who have experience of accessing the service and by employing people with lived experience. Referring to positive activities both within and outside of the sector can introduce people to others with similar interests. Seeking to link people to others within the wider community helps people to put down roots and to make a whole new set of positive friendships. These are all ways that organisations can encourage positive social connections.



## CONSISTENCY: Everything about our organisation reflects our commitment to a strengths-based approach.

6. Our values are reflected in every part of our organisation including our service delivery, structures, governance, policies and procedures and administrative functions.
7. Continual reflection on every part of our organisation, including the language we use, is a core part of our work.
8. Our organisation is run with, and led by, the people who use it as equal partners with staff and managers

### 6. Our values are reflected in every part of our organisation including our service delivery, structures, governance, policies and procedures and administrative functions.

Being strengths-based isn't just an approach taken by support staff or about how one particular part of a service or organisation operates. It needs to be reflected in everything your organisation does; from your policies and procedures to your maintenance contracts and financial processes. Your Board need to be signed up, as well as your managers and wider staff team. It's a big task and one that you will continue to work towards and reflect upon, rather than something to complete and tick off the list.

The concept that an approach needs to permeate all layers of an organisation isn't new. This is common to other approaches such as Psychological Informed Environments or Trauma Informed Care. If your organisation already adopts one of these ways of working, then you will know that this is an important but long and challenging task. The benefits will be a whole-organisational environment that works consistently and sustainably in a strengths-based way.

#### What have we done in the past?

We sometimes apply good practice to our support services but not across our management, governance or policies. Sometimes we employ a worker to champion a specific approach or provide a specialised service, while the rest of the staff team operate as normal. Although this can be the first step to adopting a new form of practice more widely, it can be challenging for a staff member to successfully implement a new method when other parts of the service or organisation work differently. As a result, the impact is limited because the change has only occurred in one distinct area.

#### What is the impact of this?

There can be conflict between the way different elements of the service operate which impacts how support is provided and accepted. An example may be a support worker establishing a trusting relationship with someone who then receives a coldly worded behavioural warning letter from another part of the organisation. This can ultimately impact the trust an individual has with the worker or organisation, the process of rebalancing power and can even lead to a 'good cop/bad cop' type situation, where some staff are prized more than others.

Another challenge is where the approach is not reflected in policies, procedures and organisational governance, making it difficult to re-shape the service around strengths and goals and the things that are learned from truly listening to people. For example, if the worker would like to take time to develop a trusting relationship but they are required to complete specific assessment forms or risk assessments at their first meeting.

### **How is being strengths-based different?**

Being strengths-based is reflected in the whole organisational system and culture. In order to adapt an organisation's focus a range of things must be considered including how progress is measured, the relationships held with commissioners and where funding is sought (including relinquishing or refusing contracts that contradict the ethos). Organisations need to employ people who have the values, interest and skills to work in this way and that sometimes means losing others who want to work differently. Trusting staff is crucial to this approach and they need freedom and confidence to use their judgment rather than seeking approval for trying different ways of working. You may need to get agreement from the Board to do these things; this isn't something that can happen unless you have buy-in from every person at every level.

Strengths-based values should be reflected in who and how you recruit, how you support staff, the services you provide, the decisions you make and the way you raise money. It is a 'whole' approach rather than an add-on. This is not to say that you won't start somewhere; each organisation has to take the first step because transformation does not happen overnight. However, it is essential to work towards being strengths-based in its fullest sense to enable true and lasting change to occur.

### **7. Continual reflection on every part of our organisation, including the language we use, is a core part of our work.**

Becoming strengths-based is not an overnight shift but is an ongoing process that requires continual reflection at every stage. Being reflective is an essential part of doing things well. This involves general reflection on personal working style as well as reflecting regularly on the organisation as a whole and how things need to evolve. One key part of this is language. How we talk about ourselves and other people matters. As an organisation it is important to ensure that strengths-based language, reflecting your ethos, is used. Language evolves so this is an ongoing process that you will need to re-visit regularly.

### **What have we done in the past?**

Some parts of our sector and some organisations are more reflective than others. In many cases reflection takes place at an annual away day or as part of a specific project but the day-to-day business of running an organisations means that reflection may not happen more regularly. Similarly reflection may be done at management or board level without including staff, volunteers and people accessing services.

Reflective practice is an important part of being reflective but does not represent the whole picture. Reflective practice often takes place once a month and may focus on one issue that is raised or a particular situation. It does not replace the need to be reflective in a broader sense on a day-to-day basis.

In terms of language, like any sector, ours has a language of its own. Many organisations have already given a great deal of thought to how they refer to the people using their services and most use 'clients', 'customers', 'residents' or 'service users'. Each of these has slightly different connotations and will mean different things to people due to past experiences. We may refer to staff as support, project or key workers. We have 'case conferences', 'multi-agency meetings', and talk of 'accommodation pathways', 'referral routes' and 'verification'.

We are the homelessness sector and we work with 'the homeless', 'homeless people' or 'people experiencing homelessness'. The people we work with have 'support needs' or 'multiple and complex needs'. They are 'entrenched' or 'resistant to services' or 'hard to reach' or 'hard to engage'. We talk about 'assessments and

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risk assessments', 'anti-social behaviour', 'behavioural contracts', 'eviction notices', 'warnings' and 'bars'. There is a long list of sector-specific terms and jargon.

### **What is the impact of this?**

We are used to, and unquestioning, of much of this language. We might shy away from some of the phrases named above but we may think others are fine to use. Individually, there may be nothing particularly wrong with some of the terms, but overall they paint a picture of a sector with fairly passive recipients identified by a range of negative characteristics or problems.

There is extensive research demonstrating that people adapt their behaviour to fit the labels they are given and the expectations others have of them<sup>18</sup>. Using negative language reinforces negative self-image, not to mention the image the support worker themselves then has of the person. Using de-personalised language can lead staff to distance themselves from those supported; perhaps as a psychological defence against the incredibly difficult work they sometimes have to do. However, distancing affects our ability to take a human and relational approach where each person is treated as an individual.

If an organisation is not continually reflective then it may not fully embed a new form of good practice. Change can sometimes only happen on a superficial level or may only reach particular people within an organisation. As such the adoption of a new approach can stall or become tokenistic.

### **How is being strengths-based different?**

Being strengths-based involves reflecting continually on both our own working practice and the working of the organisation. Organisations should be continually evolving and aiming to go deeper with embedding the approach as they learn more.

This includes reflecting on language, emphasising how the language we use sets culture within the organisation. The way we speak should reflect and reinforce our belief in people and our equal partnership with them. Using positive language as much as possible builds peoples' confidence and independence and enables us to operate in a more equal manner. There is no blueprint for which terms to use but it's preferable to avoid labelling people as homeless, complex or entrenched. We are interested in people and their individual strengths and ambitions; the difficulties people face are part of their experience (hopefully a temporary part) but they don't define who they are.

## **8. Our organisation is run with and led by the people who use it as equal partners with staff and managers**

Co-production happens when organisations are designed and run with the people who use them as equal partners with staff and managers. Co-production is not just an issue of fairness; it is important because when people are treated as equals, including in the day to day running of an organisation, they grow in confidence and capability<sup>19</sup>. The organisation is shaped by this and better reflects the needs of everyone within it. However this does not mean everyone must participate. There will be people who only want to engage briefly

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<sup>18</sup> Becker, H. (1973) *Outsiders*. New York: Free Press; Sampson, R.J. and Laub, J.H. (2005) 'When prediction fails: from crime-prone boys to heterogeneity in adulthood' in R.J.Sampson and J.H.Laub (eds) *Developmental Criminology and its discontents: trajectories of crime from childhood to old age*. Sage, London

<sup>19</sup> For more information about co-production, please look at our toolkit <https://www.homeless.org.uk/co-production-toolkit>

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with your organisation, but there should be the opportunity for involvement at every level for those who want to.

### What have we done in the past?

Co-production isn't a new concept but most organisations provide services to recipients without involving them in delivery or decision making. There may be an annual feedback survey or a monthly forum, however for the most part, input is subsidiary at best.

### What is the impact of this?

This can lead individuals to feel like a passive recipient of a service, who are being 'done to' rather than 'with'. This can undermine self-esteem and create dependency on services, preventing people from having the opportunity to build confidence, independence and capability in a safe environment. Not only that, the service will not operate in the best way because the people using it are not being listened to, and learning from their knowledge and experience is not incorporated.

### How is being strengths-based different?

Being strengths-based means involving the people accessing services as equal partners and it is essential that listening underpins the way you work. Just as the staff member develops an active listening relationship, the organisation also needs to be listening and adapting itself to what they learn. We have a separate toolkit on co-production that can be accessed [here](#)<sup>20</sup>. In brief, we should be creating opportunities for people to participate at every level of our organisations and continually evolve according to peoples' needs. We want those using services to feel like members and partners, not recipients.

## COMMUNITIES: We play an active part in the wider community

9. We know that people thrive when they are part of a wider community and we actively encourage participation within it

10. We work actively to promote strengths-based working and create fairer opportunities for people to live to their potential.

### 9. We know that people thrive when they are part of a wider community and we actively encourage participation within it

A key feature of being strengths-based is the aim of involving people in the wider community without limiting them to specialist services.

### What have we done in the past?

Most support providers tend to refer to a relatively limited list of activities and partner agencies, and where an individual expresses an interest in a particular activity, there can be a tendency to refer them to a homelessness specific service or to set up a group within the organisation.

### What is the impact of this?

Participating in activities that are hosted by homelessness organisations can be a crucial first step to building confidence, developing relationships with peers and discovering new interests. However, whilst these activities

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.homeless.org.uk/co-production-toolkit>

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are positive, for someone to move on and lead a full life we need to enable them to forge links in wider society. For some people this transition will be easy but for others it is more of a stretch. However it is important to remember that if people are not given the chance to interact with the wider community, they may not develop the skills and networks needed to move on from homelessness for good. They may not be able to envisage themselves holding different roles in society.

### **How is being strengths-based different?**

A key feature of working in a strengths-based way is involving people in regular activities within their wider community. If someone expresses an interest in joining a class or group, look for groups provided within the community. Activities provided by homelessness services can offer a really positive opportunity for people to build self-esteem and expand their horizons and wellbeing. However, being strengths-based is about supporting people to build a balanced life involving friends and networks beyond those offered within the homelessness sector. Activities your organisation offers can support this by being outward facing; for example if there is an art group can you hold an exhibition outside of the service or look to connect the group with community wide art projects?

Ultimately, the aim is to involve people in activities taking place in the community alongside other community members with different life experiences. This enables the person to forge new friendships, familiarise themselves with different locations and settings and expand their horizons. This allows them to become a more active member in their local community and on the path away from homelessness services.

### **1. We work actively to promote strengths-based working and create fairer opportunities for people to live to their potential.**

Once organisations start working in a strengths-based way, it becomes clear that partner organisations need to follow suit to avoid a clash when people access other services. It also becomes clear that there are limits to how much any one approach or organisation can impact someone's future where there are structural barriers to leading a positive life.

### **What have we done in the past?**

In the past most organisations have applied an approach to their own services but few have looked beyond at the wider area. In addition, few organisations have tried to influence others to adopt similar styles of working.

As a sector we have sometimes taken responsibility when people fail to move forwards in their lives and this is not inappropriate – we should look to improve and be willing to see where we may have fallen short. However, it needs to be recognised that we are only one part of the picture. There need to be opportunities in society more broadly to enable people to lead the lives they deserve. Many of these things are beyond the gift of a homelessness service provider.

### **What is the impact of this?**

The ability of any one organisation to impact peoples' futures can be negatively affected if other organisations and broader society don't offer similar opportunities.

### **How is being strengths-based different?**

A strengths-based approach recognises that to create genuine opportunities, other services should work in a similar way. Strengths-based organisations often seek to influence others to adopt the approach.

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Local areas are increasingly looking at developing positive approaches across their regions. This has often meant creating local networks to learn more about an approach and beginning to formulate an approach that works locally. This can then be used across different organisations and by commissioners and funders when looking to procure services. This can be an extremely positive way to move forwards creating buy-in from different providers and including people with experience of accessing services in the development of the approach.

In our sector, we strive continually to do things better and improve our practice and this toolkit is part of that. However we need to recognise that perfect practice cannot end homelessness without broader societal change. A commitment to working in a strengths-based way includes working towards a fairer and more equal society. We can do this by challenging the laws, policies and systems that we think are disadvantaging people.

### Definitions and principles from other sources

The principles offered in this toolkit are rooted in practice and research that has developed over many years in other fields. The concept of strengths-based working has been particularly strong within the social work, mental health and addiction sectors in the United States. However it also exists, with different names and slightly different parameters, in other areas like community development. It can be useful to examine some of the definitions and principles from other sources and sectors to deepen understanding of what it means to be strengths-based.

#### The Strengths Model

Perhaps the best known set of 'principles' comes from Richard Rapp and Patrick Sullivan; professors of social work in the United States who first developed thinking about strength-based working in the 1980s. Their six principles are the foundation for most other work in this area:

1. People Can Learn, Grow and Change
2. The Focus is on Individual Strengths Rather than Deficits
3. The Community is Viewed as an Oasis of Resources
4. The Client is the Director of the Helping Process
5. The Worker-Client Relationship is Primary and Essential
6. The Primary Setting for Our Work is the Community<sup>21</sup>

Rapp and Sullivan primarily worked with people requiring support with their mental health and developed the principles within a context of pathologisation and institutionalisation. Their approach turned the existing ways of working on its head and through this work they and others helped people to move beyond their diagnoses to lead full lives, using abilities that had previously been overlooked.

Thinking on strengths-based approaches has developed since Rapp and Sullivan first presented their ideas, yet they remain at the heart of how the approach is understood by most. The central belief is in peoples' abilities, partnerships and community remain central to strengths-based thinking and other approaches developed since.

#### Strengths Perspective

Different writers have placed emphasis on particular elements of Rapp and Sullivan's principles. Dennis Saleeby's book, *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice*<sup>22</sup>, is probably the go-to text book for understanding the approach. Saleeby emphasises that, as workers, we sometimes struggle to recognise the knowledge and insight that people have into their own situation. He argues that the aim of working in a strengths-based way is to uncover this knowledge and use it as the basis of all work<sup>23</sup>.

In addition to his own set of 'principles' (see Appendix), Saleeby describes a 'lexicon of strengths', words and concepts that demonstrate the core values of a Strengths Perspective. Key to his understanding are resilience and healing; people experience trauma but the majority survive and develop resilience and skills as a result.

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<sup>21</sup> Rapp, C.A and Sullivan, W.P (2012) The Strengths Model: Birth to Toddlerhood *Advances in Social Work* Vol. 15 No. 1 (Spring 2014), 129-142

<sup>22</sup> Saleeby, D. ed., (2013) *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* (Sixth Edition). New Jersey: Pearson.

<sup>23</sup> Saleeby, D. Introduction: Power in the people in Saleeby, D. Ed., (2013) *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* (Sixth Edition). New Jersey: Pearson.

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He also emphasises empowerment, membership and collaboration; working alongside people in partnership and broking opportunities for growth and inclusion.

### Strengths Approach

Wayne McCashen, is a trainer and consultant on strengths-based work in Australia and New Zealand. He describes a Strengths Approach as a philosophy, and outlines a set of features and beliefs inherent to the approach (see Appendix). For McCashen, the emphasis is on the potential people have for change; including their own agency and ability to mobilise change for themselves. He identifies the role of support worker as a facilitator who creates conditions, and makes use of resources, to enable change to happen<sup>24</sup>. He defines a Strengths Approach as having the following key features:

1. The strengths approach is a philosophy for working with people to bring about change.
2. It is an approach to people that is primarily dependent upon positive attitudes about people's dignity, capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities.
3. It emphasises people's ability to be their own agents of change by creating conditions that enable them to control and direct the processes of change they engage in.
4. It creates conditions that enable people to identify, value and mobilise their strengths and capacities in the process of change.
5. It provides and mobilises resources in a way that complements people's existing strengths and resources, as opposed to compensation for perceived deficits.
6. It acknowledges and addresses power imbalances between people working in human services and those they work with.
7. It seeks to identify and address social, personal, cultural and structural constraints to people's growth and self-determination.
8. It acknowledges and addresses power dynamics, cultures and structures in organisations that are incongruent with socially-just practice.

### Advantaged Thinking

Colin Falconer of Inspire Chilli, a partner on this project, and formerly of the Foyer Federation, developed the concept of Advantaged Thinking in his work with young people. In addition to drawing on a strengths-based approach, Advantaged Thinking recognises the critical importance of the geographic, systemic and institutional settings within which people must make choices about their lives.

It sees people as always situated within place, and the structures which either enable or curtail their ability to build a good life. In doing so, it recognises that any effort to create change for people must attend to both this individual and structural context, making positive investment and influencing change in both; one without the other cannot make lasting change for individuals or communities. An Advantaged Thinking approach sets, as a primary goal, a shift in both how the government and community sectors invest in young people, and how the community sees young people and their capacity to contribute.

To develop Advantaged Thinking further, Colin introduced Seven Tests of Advantaged Thinking during his work at the Foyer Federation. The tests are not something you simply pass or fail; they exist to offer constant guidance to be Advantaged Thinking. They are written as a set of seven powerful questions:

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<sup>24</sup> McCashen, W. (2005) *The Strengths Approach; a strengths-based resource for sharing power and creating change*. Victoria, St Lukes Innovative Resources.



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1. How do you talk about people?
2. How do you understand people?
3. How do you work with people?
4. How do you invest in people?
5. How do you believe in people?
6. How do you involve people?
7. How do you challenge people (yourself and others)?

These tests are a useful framework for examining our progress in becoming strengths-based<sup>25</sup>.

### Strengths-based approach for social workers in the UK

In 2019, the UK Government's Department of Health and Social Care produced a practice framework and handbook on the strengths-based approach for social workers. In addition to identifying the features outlined below, the handbook states that a strengths-based approach "isn't about services...it is about meaningful lives, it is about the individual and their social and family networks and their communities and how all of them link together maximising outcomes for individuals".

The handbook also notes two other points of particular interest. It stresses that risk should be seen as an enabler rather than a barrier; an opportunity for discussion and to find potential benefits of activities as well as risks. It also discusses the concept of empowerment and states: "We think it is a bit arrogant to believe that we have the ability to give people power. We instead should be helping people find the power within themselves, providing them with tools to find their own power."<sup>26</sup>

#### Strengths-based approach/practice is...

- An approach 'how to carry out interventions'
- Holistic and multidisciplinary
- Collaborative
- Proportionate
- Appropriate to the individual circumstances = flexible
- Aligned with risk enablement and positive risk taking
- A focus on 'what matters to you' and what is strong'
- Identifying personal, family and community strengths and support the individual in linking with them
- Supporting community development
- Applicable to any intervention, setting, type or level of need and profession.

*Key features of a strengths-based approach as described in the DHSC handbook*

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<sup>25</sup> With thanks to Colin Falconer of Inspire Chilli for contributing this to the toolkit.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Health and Social Care (2019) Strengths-based approach: practice framework and practice handbook. Accessed online.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/778134/stengths-based-approach-practice-framework-and-handbook.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778134/stengths-based-approach-practice-framework-and-handbook.pdf)

### Good Help Project

Finally, Nesta and Osca have recently collaborated on the Good Help Project<sup>27</sup>. This promotes that we need to re-design the way we support people, across a number of sectors, and has a great deal in common with strengths-based working. They too have defined a set of key principles which are copied below.

#### 1. Power sharing

The relationships between professionals and people should allow power to be shared rather than 'directing' people to do things. An adult-to-adult relationship needs to be established, in which each person's knowledge and ideas are considered equally.

#### 2. Enabling conversations

The way that conversations are structured and that questions are asked can help people to think through what's important to them and to come up with their own solutions. These conversations build a sense of safety, trust, ownership and motivation for action.

#### 3. Tailoring

For help to be transformational, it needs to be personalised. This can be achieved by helping people to define their own purpose and goals. This might sound obvious, but many programmes offer a standardised approach that can feel impersonal and mechanistic.

#### 4. Scaffolding

Practitioners can start to step back as the people they help build enough confidence to take action alone. This ensures that

change is sustained. Help may need to be ongoing for some people, but should create opportunities for people to take action themselves where possible.

#### 5. Role modelling and peer support

Positive relationships expand our sense of what is possible and help us do things we wouldn't attempt alone. Often the most powerful relationships are with people we consider similar to ourselves.

#### 6. Opportunity making

Sometimes opportunities need to be created or barriers need to be removed to help people take action. This may require help from an external source. Examples include brokering relationships which lead to new voluntary or paid work, or other health creating or educational activities.

#### 7. Transparency

Professionals (and their organisations) often have access to information about people that is not routinely shared with people themselves. Having open and shared data is an important part of building an adult-adult relationship and supporting people to make informed decisions.

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Described above are just a small selection of the key ideas and contributions in the field of strengths-based work, and there is a great deal of writing about different but related approaches including Open Talent and Asset Based Community Development. If you are interested in reading more, we suggest you start by looking at the resources listed below.

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<sup>27</sup> Nesta and Osca (2018) Good and Bad Help <https://goodhelp.org.uk/portfolio/good-and-bad-help/>

## Suggested Further Reading

### Books and articles

Cottam, H. (2019) *Radical help – how we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state*. Virago. London

Department of Health and Social Care (2019) *Strengths-based approach: practice framework and practice handbook*:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/778134/strengths-based-approach-practice-framework-and-handbook.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778134/strengths-based-approach-practice-framework-and-handbook.pdf)

McCashen, W. (2005) *The Strengths Approach; a strengths-based resource for sharing power and creating change*. Victoria, St Luke's Innovative Resources.

Rapp, R. (2007) The Strengths Perspective: Proving “My Strengths” and “It Works” in Social Work 52 (2) 185-186 available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2254514/>

Saleebey, D. Ed., (2013) *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* (Sixth Edition). New Jersey: Pearson

### Blogs and websites

“Marvin Rules” blog: [www.orgcode.com/marvin](http://www.orgcode.com/marvin)

“Zumba, let’s get loud” blog by Paddy Bates: [www.maydaytrust.org.uk/zumba/](http://www.maydaytrust.org.uk/zumba/)

“Why Strengths Based Programmes Can’t Ignore Weaknesses” blog by Strengths Partnership: [www.strengthspartnership.com/blog/strengths-based-programs-cant-ignore-weaknesses/](http://www.strengthspartnership.com/blog/strengths-based-programs-cant-ignore-weaknesses/)

“The Art of Listening” by Andrew Durman: [www.maydaytrust.org.uk/blog/the-art-of-listening](http://www.maydaytrust.org.uk/blog/the-art-of-listening)

“Please Don’t Call us ‘Difficult to Engage’” Joy Hibbins: [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/joy-hibbins/please-dont-call-us-difficult-to-engage\\_b\\_10988746.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/joy-hibbins/please-dont-call-us-difficult-to-engage_b_10988746.html)

Strengths Based Approaches Information, Social Care Institute for Excellence: [www.scie.org.uk/care-act-2014/assessment-and-eligibility/strengths-based-approach/](http://www.scie.org.uk/care-act-2014/assessment-and-eligibility/strengths-based-approach/)

Strengths Based Approaches for Working With Individuals by Iriss: [www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/strengths-based-approaches-working-individuals](http://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/strengths-based-approaches-working-individuals)

Good Help <https://goodhelp.org.uk/>

### Organisational reports and resources

The VIA Strength Assessment: <https://www.viacharacter.org/>

## Homeless Link

Deconstructing the System – The Mayday Trust: [www.maydaytrust.org.uk/homelessness-system-under-deconstruction](http://www.maydaytrust.org.uk/homelessness-system-under-deconstruction)

“Asset Based Thinking”, Foyer Federation <https://www.foyer.net/homeforadvantagedthinking>

Housing Resource Specialist Toolkit, Community Rebuilders <https://communityrebuilders.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Community-Rebuilders-Housing-Resource-Specialist-Toolkit-2015-.pdf>

“Strengths Based Practice”, Ruth Wallbank, Transatlantic Practice Exchange 2017 (pp 17-22):  
[www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Transatlantic%20Practice%20Exchange%202017.pdf](http://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Transatlantic%20Practice%20Exchange%202017.pdf)

Developing a Wellbeing and Strengths-based Approach to Social Work Practice: Changing cultures:  
[www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/\\_assets/Resources/TLAP/BCC/TLAPChangingSWCulture.pdf](http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/_assets/Resources/TLAP/BCC/TLAPChangingSWCulture.pdf)

Strengths-based Social Work with Adults, Roundtable Report:  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/652773/Strengths-based\\_social\\_work\\_practice\\_with\\_adults.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/652773/Strengths-based_social_work_practice_with_adults.pdf)

## Appendix: Extracts from other texts

Dennis Saleeby in *A Strengths Perspective*<sup>28</sup>

1. Every individual, group, family and community has strengths
2. Trauma and abuse, illness and struggle may be injurious but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity
3. Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change and take individual, group and community aspirations seriously.
4. We best serve clients by collaborating with them
5. Every environment is full of resources
6. Caring, caretaking and context

McCashen in *The Strengths Approach*<sup>29</sup>.

1. All people have strengths and capacities
2. People can change. Given the right conditions and resources people's capacity to learn and grow can be harnessed and mobilised
3. People change and grow through their strengths and capacities
4. People are the experts on their own situation
5. The problem is the problem; the person is not the problem
6. Problems can blind people from noticing and appreciating their strengths and capacity to find their own solutions
7. People have good intentions
8. People are doing the best they can
9. The power for change is within us.

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<sup>28</sup> Saleeby, D. Introduction: Power in the people in Saleeby, D. Ed., (2013) *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* (Sixth Edition). New Jersey: Pearson

<sup>29</sup> McCashen, W. (2005) *The Strengths Approach; a strengths-based resource for sharing power and creating change*. Victoria, St Lukes Innovative Resources.



## What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

## Let's end homelessness together

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