

Strengths based social care in Leeds City Council



The way we provide social care in Leeds has undergone something of a quiet revolution over the past year. We've long aspired to offer support in a way that enables people to live a better life, but recognised this doesn't always happen in practice.

We realised we were operating a gift and entitlement model, rather than working with the individual and their community's strengths. We wanted to reclaim social work, moving away from eligibility and assessment towards a strengths based and person centred approach. Our Occupational Therapists have also committed to embedding these values in their practice.

With strengths based social care, the starting point is always to look first at what someone can do, not what they can't do.

Moving from 'what's wrong?' to 'what's strong?'

When someone now contacts us for help we don't think about eligibility criteria and assessments.

Instead we have an initial conversation with someone to understand their concerns, see what they have tried already, and try to get them to the right place to help them.

That 'right place' may be a conversation with one of the social work team at a local community venue, but it may be some peer support or a community group.

Better Conversations

One of the fundamental changes in our approach is a focus on having *better conversations* with people.

Rather than arriving at someone's house with a long assessment form which we try to get through in a single session, we may have a series of conversations with practical actions between each one.

The type of conversations we have can broadly be described as three different conversations:

- **Connecting people.** This is about considering what is already going on in someone's life, what is important to them and whether there are other individuals, groups and services in their community that can help with the current issue.

- **Responding at a time of crisis.** Crisis conversations focus on the immediate, short term action that may be needed to get someone through a sudden change in their circumstances. We won't make any long term plans or decisions at this stage.
- **Planning for the longer term.** This is the type of conversation that may happen if someone already accesses support from us when we review their support needs. It is also the type of conversation we would have if, after exploring what is already available to the individual or getting them through a period of crisis, we identify an ongoing need for formal support.

Our story: how we have developed strengths based social care and our plans for the future.....

The Armley Innovator

Armley were our first neighbourhood team to move to strengths-based social care. It was important to the team that they spent more time in the community, built relationships and really understood what was available to the people that they support.

Justine, Senior Social Worker, Armley

“Engaging with the local community centre feels like it has opened a lot of doors for the team. Basic things like knowing about other local organisations and events that are going on, being able to put faces to names and to network in the local area. I have found this much more enjoyable as a worker than seeing names on referral forms.”

The team established a ‘Talking Point’ at New Wortley Community Centre. This meant that the Contact Centre could quickly arrange appointments with the social work team for people whose needs could not be met at the front door. Being able to see people quicker was one of the aims of strengths-based social care but getting in quickly has other advantages too.

Sarah, Social Worker, Armley

“Since starting in the innovation site I have felt more confident about trying things first, if the neighbourhood network doesn't work, and the GPS tracker does not do enough to manage her safety, we can always meet again and discuss further. Generally people won't have to wait more than a few days for an appointment so we can offer a much more responsive service and manage crises better.”



Rapid Response

In some instances social work need to intervene very quickly to make sure that an individual is safe. Sometimes this will be someone who is already known to us - in these instances we will try and make sure that the team who support this individual respond as this provides consistency and means we can really tailor what is needed to that person.

Often we are asked to respond at a time of crisis for someone that we do not know. To ensure that we can always respond quickly (within four hours) in these cases, we have developed a rapid response team.

Rapid response workers do not support anyone long term. This means that they can be very responsive when a crisis situation comes in. They will quickly unpick the issue and develop a plan to make sure the person is safe. They will hold on to the case for up to 72 hours whilst they put this plan in action and monitor it. If the crisis continues beyond this time then they will pass it to the local team to continue to support. In this way we ensure rapid response always have capacity to respond in that critical first three days.

Experience of the Rapid Response Service:

“Fabulous. Family and carers very impressed with how prompt services were put in place.”

Strengths Based Social Care in Learning Disability Services

When we were developing the model for strengths based social care we knew it needed to work for everyone. We wanted to make sure we had a model that worked equally well for people with learning disabilities and their families.

It was very important to the learning disability service that the people they support and the organisations they work with were involved right from the start. This meant building in time to talk to voluntary and community groups. It also meant making sure that communications were accessible and project meetings ran in a way that meant everyone could give their views

Philip, customer representative from the People's Parliament and member of the Project Team:

“You have helped me have more confidence in myself. I like the way the Project Team is organised - the chair is calm, understanding and patient, and I feel involved in conversations and listened to. It feels like people are taking me seriously”.

Strengths-based social care in Mental Health Services

Strengths based social care felt like a natural fit for mental health social workers. The mental health recovery model has the same positive aspiration around working with people to support them to live an ordinary life.

“Mr X liked being around people on the ward when he was in hospital - so much so that he goes back every so often to spend time in the cafe. He told us he missed being around people and that he is very lonely. The social worker identified support to help him around the home and in the community, to help him improve his confidence and make friends.”

Peer support and challenge

We knew that strengths-based social care was about culture change. Yes, we have needed to make a lot of changes to paperwork and processes, but this has been to support a change in culture. Social workers have embraced the change but recognised that pressure of work can make it easy to slip back into old practice. To enable growth of a strengths-based culture peer review has been introduced as an element of the model.

Before agreeing support plans teams present their cases to peers. The social worker will give a brief overview of their case and plan (about two minutes), colleagues have two minutes to clarify the detail of the case and a further two to offer suggestions of other ways to meet the individual's needs.

This is a new way of working across all teams but has been positively received. Social workers report that colleagues always have interesting things to contribute, meaning the team learn from one another, and that there are often parallels with people on your own caseload.

Impact on customers

The most important element of strengths-based social care is the aspiration to provide a better model of support for the people that access our services.

As strengths-based practice is relatively new in Leeds we still have a way to go before we can fully assess the impact for the population but we are already receiving positive feedback from individuals on the difference it has made for them.



Rhona,
Team Leader,
Armley

“The customer said that she has had many social workers over the years and was particularly complimentary of this and one other. Currently she feels that the social worker works in partnership with her and takes a very empowering approach to supporting her. She said that she and the social worker often negotiate re timescales and responses and she feels that the social worker is open and honest with her.”

Next Steps

The story of strengths based social care in Leeds has been one of local learning and incremental change as teams have shared enthusiasm and good practice and developed new approaches.

Our goal over the coming months is to make this the new normal.

This will include developing our community presence further, sharing the learning from innovators with colleagues across all teams, and working with providers to ensure the approach is reflected across the social care workforce.



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