

A Strengths-Based Approach to supporting offenders in the NW

Colleagues are increasingly exploring 'strength' or 'asset based' approaches. Put simply, an asset based approach begins with the person or the communities' assets and strengths, and explores how they can be put in control.

In the NW we are working towards an OD programme for organisations, and a Festival of Strengths later in the year will showcase all our good work. Different approaches are already being delivered across the NW. As we identify exactly what a strengths based approach 'looks, smells and feels' like, the NW ADASS Programme Office is looking to identify examples.

One NW local authority agreed to share a fantastic example of how partners can work in new ways in order to support offenders. Details have been anonymised given the nature of the work.

Background

Although the local authority does not have a prison within its boundaries, there is a long standing recognition that social care can play a supportive role for offenders. Offenders return from prisons into communities, neighbourhoods and families; and often require support around employment support, substance misuse and domestic violence. Older offenders may require more mainstream social care support which is organised by the recipient local authority. This approach had long been endorsed by the Community Safety Partnership.

Within the local authority a partnership of four providers had been commissioned to provide drug and alcohol support. This grew into outreach to the local prison where the majority of the local authorities' offenders were located. The services had been recommissioned in order to move away from a medical model of drug and alcohol services. More recently a housing provider had joined the partnership to offer specialist housing support including substance misuse rehab.

The partnership developed a 'Compact', agreed with the person, in order to qualify for a property. Beginning in prison, the person would sign up to 16 hours a week activity (engagement in support groups, employment) which would continue as the person returned to the community.

A strength based approach

The commissioner felt that the role of commissioning required a 'real' partnership with providers. This included getting out to see the services and people receiving them. As a result, the commissioner would visit the prison and meet with their local authorities' prisoners.

Within the prison "Mike" had already begun to engage with services. Mike had spent 15 years regularly in prison for drug, driving and burglary related offences. Mike described that he had begun to reflect about his life and became more receptive to services, in particular to rebuild relations with his family.

The commissioner refers back to a single conversation at this, discussing the cost of residential drug rehab. Having already built trust the commissioner had asked:

"Why should we spend this money when you have been there so many times before? How can we trust that you will not go back to dealing/using drugs and that you will you not to re-offend?"

*"Because you **can**. And I'll get my case worker to get in contact with you to prove it."*

This conversation built on the support being offered in prison to support Mike in the community. The case worker did get in contact, and the last 18 months represents a long journey in which the person's confidence and skills were slowly built up. Commissioners and providers were willing to work flexibly, and individuals at different times trusted

the person and made themselves available to communicate. Mike's journey including accessing mental health services, completing recovery, engaging with a support service to build relations with the family, and building confidence to participate in a community where he was well known. The journey included meeting with the local police force to discuss experiences and apologise, which led to a later presentation to over 150 at a police event.

Mike has not re-offended, or returned to substance abuse, and is experiencing the longest period in his life out of prison since adolescence.

The prison saw Mike as an asset very early in the process and offered volunteering roles. He now works 2 days a week in the prison running workshops and supporting prisoners. More recently the local authority recognised the potential for Mike to act as a role model in communities where families experience the complexities and harm caused by offending and drug misuse. This had led to him taking up a post in community development within the Council.

Next steps

This work was not without its challenges and working in a different way needs to be balanced with an understanding of risk. However, from the partnerships' point of view this represents a major success. The person is not only no longer offending, but is in employment, and is supporting informal peer networks.

Much of this work involved informal discussions and networking between the partners. The commissioner had to persuade a provider and colleagues to invest in the individual. While the change in offending and substance misuse was ultimately down to the individual, the partnership helped provide an environment where this could be achieved.

The local authority is now interested in understanding how this approach can be extended to work with more people. This approach has informed the way the partnership works. Volunteering and employment support is starting to see success, with a pathway from prison to community, for more ex-offenders. Initial work to produce a cost benefit analysis has begun.

Reflections

Within the region we are looking for 'light bulb moments' that demonstrate the impact strength based working can have. This example raises questions about the role of commissioning, but also how organisations can encourage strength based approaches. How do organisations permit innovation? How can you balance risk and perceptions of an ex-offender against the opportunity to support a person and see them as a genuine asset? When is it permissible to 'break the rules' and go beyond your written JD?

If you found this case study useful, or have any examples you'd like to share please get in touch at

a.burridge@wigan.gov.uk