

# Building on strengths is better than focusing on weaknesses

Even in the most difficult circumstances people and communities have much to offer. They are well placed to come up with the solutions, and to take action accordingly. Defining people by their 'needs' or deficits, and doing things for or to rather than with them, creates dependency. Creating conditions where people can flourish on their own terms sets them free.



Department of Dependency and Care  
Cartoon by Crippen  
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# THE GOOD AND THE BAD



## A PERSONAL STORY BY CLARE WIGHTMAN

I work in Spon End, in Coventry. Like people, neighbourhoods can get a reputation that stops you from seeing the good in them. People call Spon End 'the Bronx of Coventry' – people who've never been to the real Bronx. The story I am going to tell you now is about the good and the bad in my neighbourhood.

Chris, Margaret and their daughter lived on a tough estate. Some neighbours spotted their vulnerability. Pretending to be friends, people like Linda would come in, take over the flat and use their phone. This went on for years. Then things got even worse. Margaret told us they were hounded by some people. 'They swore and shouted at us, put rubbish through our letterbox. They would knock our door at night with masks on. They even stole our daughter's birthday balloons and banners. It was horrible. We phoned the police but they didn't take us seriously.'

The turning point came when we got alongside an older neighbour

and talked about the problem with her. Next time she reported the harassment to the police. She could write down what happened and when. Chris and Margaret felt reassured that she spoke up for them. We talked to the local shopkeeper too and asked them to keep an eye out.

We introduced Chris and Margaret to another couple, Robin and Christine, who invited them for a BBQ and movie nights. The two men enjoy vegetable gardening. In fact, there is a growing community of gardeners that help each other out – including that older neighbour who called the police.

**'It makes all the difference when we've got people around us'**

It makes all the difference when we've got people around us who can help us to get over problems, and not feel we're stuck on our own. And help is available in communities if we know how to find it.

Faced with Chris and Margaret's experiences we had a choice. We could have just given them a service, a set of transactions – called the police, called the social landlord, supported them to have their say in meetings and make reports to both. But then at the close of day they'd have gone home, to the estate, alone.

We choose to help them get some real friends instead. We knew that real friends would help draw the couple in from the edge, from living on the thin ice that left them vulnerable to the type of abuse that was escalating towards them. Building on strengths is better than

focusing on weaknesses. There were real strengths in that community as well as threats and communities are powerful when people act together. They can solve problems that professionals on their own can't.

This story cuts to the heart of what we could offer in a very difficult climate for people and services alike.

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Clare Wightman is the CEO of [Grapevine Coventry and Warwickshire](#) and relationships are at the heart of their work. Clare particular interest is working in a way that develops and connects networks of local people for mutual help and support.

# TREATING LIVED EXPERIENCE AS AN ASSET, NOT A RISK



## A PERSONAL STORY BY MARK JOHNSON

In 2007, I had built up a successful aboriginal business employing people just out of prison and people recovering from substance abuse issues, after my own experiences of prison and drugs. I received a Mirror Pride of Britain Award and began working with and advising government and charities on the criminal justice system.

I saw the power of using my experiences to advise, consult, design and deliver. At one point it afforded me the opportunity to address an audience of 300 Ministry of Justice HR professionals at an event. I was quite anxious, speaking in a rarefied building literally yards from where I had slept rough in London a few years before.

I did what felt like the only thing I could do, and told the audience that I was there to tell the truth about what I saw in the criminal justice

system, and that if my observations offended anyone I was sorry for that.

I explained their services were failing, that in their system I was just an ex-offender, with a DBS record that told them everything I had done wrong. Yet I was excluded from their workplace, the design of their services and other areas of employment. I asked them to look around their office: 'What do you really know about your colleagues?' They could manage my 'risk' because they knew more about me in that regard than their workmates. They couldn't argue. I said they weren't managing risk, they were indulging in risk aversion. Fortunately, my views were well received.

The truth about my experiences was my most powerful weapon in that speech, and I went on to do more work within criminal justice, and ten years ago founded User Voice, an

organisation that uses council models in prison and probation to get the voice of service users into service design and delivery – over ninety per cent of our sixty staff are former service users.

User Voice was built on using the strengths of people and ignoring what others see as deficiencies. User Voice focuses on the strengths of lived experience not on the perceived weaknesses of lack of education, qualifications and professional track record.

### 'For too long we have had a 'colonialist' approach'

User Voices sees the lived experience of someone who has experienced drug addiction, or time spent in prison, as expertise. For too long we have had a 'colonialist' approach to delivering answers to social problems in which lived experience was excluded.

This has caused an inherent mistrust – the fact that a certain strata of society gets access to the best education and into positions of power has caused this mistrust. Our staff have the ability to fully engage with service users because they have walked in their shoes and gained insight from their own experiences

and are in a better place to elicit the experiences and insights from current service users.

We see lived experience as an asset, not a risk. It is not a reason to exclude people but a reason to include them.

It became obvious to me that this lived experience has a place, by right, in the systems we use to address social problems. I created an organisation that not only focuses on these strengths and that has changed the way services are delivered in prisons and probation, but that has also shifted the paradigm around the inclusion of former and current service users in designing and delivering services they receive. We started ten years ago when this was unheard-of – it has become a movement, as far as I am concerned, and you see organisations employing user-led approaches on a more regular basis. The danger is, of course, that if it is done badly, or in a piece-meal way, the results are not just ineffective but counter-productive. And that's the truth.

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Mark Johnson is a social entrepreneur and founder/CEO of the criminal justice charity [User Voice](#), a national organisation whose work to reduce offending is led and delivered by ex-offenders. He started User Voice from scratch ten years ago and CanDo coffee in 2015. He is an Ashoka fellow.

# JANE SLOWEY AND ADVANTAGED THINKING



## IDEAS FROM COLIN FALCONER, IN MEMORY OF JANE

Jane believed that charity should inspire action through the stories it amplifies. Back in 2004, when Jane joined the youth housing charity, the Foyer Federation, the narrative about young people was predominately negative. Too often, we knew more about what young people couldn't do than what they could. We talked about the need to help people cope, without always understanding or caring that people also need to thrive. Jane wanted to invest in a different, more honest story. Where to begin?

**'To start living again, to have a good life. Begin with opportunity'**

My mind returns to a reception at Foyles bookshop for a Foyer Federation poetry competition. It was summer 2006 and Jane was eighteen months into her new CEO role. One of the poems that night expressed young people's belief 'to start living again, to have a good life'. Jane was instantly attracted

to this as an idea: if we knew the ingredients for a good life, shouldn't we ensure they formed part of the deal for everyone to access? Jane and I reflected that the origin of Foyer in France was rooted in the question of transition – how to build an alternative induction into the shifting life of adulthood. 'Why don't we do that?' Jane suggested. It was our step into asset-based thinking: look towards a positive transition; begin with the opportunity.

The fruits of Jane's early success in leading more transition-focused programme design led to a research trip to the States in 2007. I explored services using 'developmental asset' models and returned home to express these through a social action employability programme funded by the Housing Corporation, a 'better youth offer' inquiry funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and a 'healthy transitions' programme funded by the Big Lottery.

It was not until 2009, though, that our interest in asset-based thinking found a distinctive identity. With ideas flourishing in multiple directions, Jane instructed me to write a coherent frame for our work. A post-Wimbledon article on the demise of British tennis offered an unlikely analogy to the state of youth provision. Yet, within it, I glimpsed our first blueprint for a more personalised approach to spot, coach, and promote people's talents. I remember my trepidation as I handed over a draft manifesto outlining the purpose for youth services to 'Open Talent'. Jane's response was swift: 'I stopped correcting your phrasing after page two because I was too excited by the content.' What excited Jane was not just a clearer vision for the next strategic plan – it was the wider call for systems change, in which everyone had a voice and role to play.

*Open Talent* embraced strengths-based practice, the asset-based community development model, the sustainable livelihoods approach, and the ethics of good youth work that underpinned the original holistic ethos of Foyers, fusing these together into an exciting hybrid. Funding soon followed from Virgin Unite, Esmée Fairbairn and others, supporting national pilots that freed up local innovation. But *Open*

*Talent* was not always an easy sell at a time when 'poverty porn' and deficit-based provision still went largely unquestioned. It was in an attempt to answer the doubters that we stumbled on the concepts of 'disadvantaged' and 'advantaged' thinking. We were trying to characterise the differences between problem-focused programmes seeking funding for an easy fix to disadvantage, and those willing to risk exploring the 'advantages' more likely to generate real capability for people and communities to shape their own solutions. This became the theme for a TEDx speech that I delivered in Greece in April 2011.

### 'We wanted to rebrand the narrative of 'disadvantage''

Actually, Jane had been invited to talk, but she sent me instead because she believed I would get more from the opportunity. That was always her brilliance as a leader, to harness the abilities of others. Using TEDx as a platform, we launched an Advantaged Thinking adventure to find the 'people, places, opportunities, deal and campaign' to develop young people's talents. We wanted to rebrand the narrative of 'disadvantage'. For Jane, that meant creating space for people and organisations to work together in changing the story.

The approach found an ally through Foyer Foundation Australia and partner organisations such as Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL). I was first dispatched to Australia in November 2011, with a speech illustrating how the end of youth homelessness could only be found in knowing how to shape the beginnings of youth talent. Years later, it is Australia leading the way. BSL is the first organisation to work with me to recast Advantaged Thinking into resources that will help embed a sustainable asset-based DNA across different communities of practice. Their spirit of collaboration has made me feel alive again.

What a journey. The words we heard at Foyles ended up touching the other side of the world. Now, they reverberate back in greater strength and meaning. 'That', Jane would have smiled, 'is Advantaged Thinking. What do you think?'

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Colin Falconer is Director of [Inspirechilli](#), an innovation consultancy that harnesses asset-based approaches for organisations across the UK to Australia. Colin has worked in various education, employment and quality assurance initiatives, including fourteen years as Director of Innovation at Foyer Federation where he introduced the concept of Advantaged Thinking.

# LIVED EXPERIENCE AND PEER SUPPORT AT GROUNDSWELL



## A CASE STUDY BY STEVEN PLATTS

Homelessness is a significant factor in health inequality within our society, and people experiencing homelessness can have extremely poor health compared to the general population. Groundswell's Homeless Health Peer Advocacy (HHPA) project empowers people to overcome the barriers to accessing care through the provision of Peer Advocates, all of whom have previous experience of homelessness themselves.

The peer support model breaks down barriers to engagement with healthcare services amongst 'hard-to-reach' groups through the ability of peers to draw on their shared experience to develop trusting relationships. The model is simple, peers are there to support people to attend appointments they would otherwise avoid and advocate for them to get the right service when they are there. Even simple things like

registering with a GP can be very difficult for people with no address and there are a plethora of other hurdles to overcome before even thinking about their health.

People who work with our advocates report that their confidence and knowledge to engage with the management and treatment of their healthcare increases. It's been proven that with the support of HHPA, people are able to act more independently and have the motivation to proactively manage their own health. For example the support of a peer advocate leads to earlier diagnosis of health conditions, preventing deterioration and further complications down the line.

*'Groundswell achieves not just a massive increase in access to health services but also fosters an atmosphere where clients know change is possible' – Hostel Manager*

*'If it weren't for Groundswell I reckon I would have been dead now. That's how much it made an impact in my life.'* – HHPA Client.

It was Groundswell's own research that led to the creation of HHPA. The *More than a Statistic* report revealed that one of the key barriers that people who are homeless face to getting healthcare is registering with a GP, and *The Escape Plan* found that 'involvement in a group' is key to moving on from homelessness. Activities like volunteering are invaluable – giving people opportunities to engage with things beyond day-to-day existence, increasing self-worth and confidence. As with peer advocacy, all our research is carried out by people who were homeless themselves enabling them to break down barriers of mistrust through shared experiences, and get to the heart of issues affecting homeless people.

### 'The Give a Lot – Get a Lot ethos'

Groundswell embraces the ideas of participation. The 'Give A Lot – Get A Lot' ethos is central to our understanding of participation – the idea that to be a part of something you need to invest in it and there needs to be clear benefits that you get in return. Many beneficiaries of the service go on

to be peer advocates and in turn many advocates go on to work in the sector and for Groundswell. Over half our roles are filled by people with lived experience of homelessness, from casework to finance and project management.

This development pathway from beneficiary to peer to staff is effective because our progression coaches use an asset-based approach to support people, enabling them to tap into their skills and experiences to decide on the next steps in their lives. Over the next six months, new funding streams will enable at least three more advocates to move into paid, skilled roles in our growing team. The insight they will bring us is invaluable.

The themes of lived experience and participation should guide all of Groundswell's decision-making and future work. With the thread of lived experience running right through everything we do, the formal and informal mechanisms to listen and learn are right there for all of us. As HHPA expands in London and across England and our body of peer-led research grows, we will be guided by more and more people with the knowledge needed to develop new solutions to the systemic causes of homelessness. By building on the strengths of our community

rather than focusing on their needs, the Groundswell team will have the skills and experience it needs to effectively implement these solutions and enable more and more people to move out of homelessness.



Steven Platts became CEO of [Groundswell](#) in 2018 and has over fifteen years' experience working with vulnerable people. He started his career as a hostel keyworker in Lambeth and has worked in South-East Asia with refugees and marginalised groups. In 2010 he led Glass Door to expand its supported winter shelter model in London.

# THE BENSHAM FOOD CO-OP: FOCUSING ON STRENGTHS AND MUTUALITY



## A CASE STUDY BY OLLIE BATCHELOR

It was another busy session at the Bensham Food Co-op in Gateshead this week. From early morning, the building was a hive of activity as helpers wheeled out food trolleys, set up the tables and laid out the produce. Within half an hour the space at the back of the church was transformed into a colourful market place; trays of fresh fruit and vegetables, bags of lentils and chick peas, mountains of bread and pastries, rice, flour, cous-cous and pasta of all shapes and sorts as well as eggs and numerous useful tinned items. The rich aroma of herbs and spices filled the air – cumin and coriander, chilli and turmeric, mint and rosemary. As the Co-op opened its doors there was a buzz of excitement as members met up with people they knew, went to select their food and talked together over coffee and cake.

### 'A community of mutual support'

The Co-op began as a partnership between three organisations. Corpus Christi Church provides free space for the weekly marketplace which is overseen by two small local Charities – Peace of Mind which helps refugees and asylum seekers and Soul Food Spaces which seeks to feed people physically, emotionally and spiritually. The three groups first met in Autumn 2015 at a local event to develop initiatives around food in the local area. The representatives of the three organisations recognised that they had different strengths but similar values, goals and ideas and all wanted to provide a different model of a food bank. We settled on a co-operative, with free, unlimited access to fresh produce for anyone who showed up and a community of mutual support and care built around the ideas, strengths and abilities of those who came along.

In the two years it has been running we have been able to provide fresh food for around 120 people every week, more than 11,000 in total, costing about £3000 a year. The Co-op's remit has grown as people have identified other needs or suggested things they would like to help with. Clothes, kitchen utensils, toiletries, books and toys are now available too, we have a tea and coffee area where people can sit and talk over refreshments, we serve soup and bread through the winter and there is a growing sense of community and belonging amongst the regulars. Kindnesses abound – one person came back at lunchtime having cooked a meal for the volunteers using items she had been given only an hour or so before. Another member often provides recipes or makes something to show people how to use vegetables that are less well known such as beetroot or aubergine. Co-operation extends beyond the immediate membership to surrounding schools, neighbours and nearby workplaces, who have heard about us and contribute food, goods, money or time.

**'A positive, welcoming place where members play a part'**

When we began, however, there were many voices of dissent from other organisations and 'experts' who told us we would be exploited by freeloaders, that it would be easier for us to manage if we gave out packs of food and cheaper to resource if we had just tinned and non-perishable items. Others said there would be a divide between refugees and asylum seekers and local poor people. The comments about the people we wanted to help were generalisations and defined them in terms of their situation. In short they were simply 'needy' and as such were the deserving (and undeserving) poor. Almost as a consequence unimaginative, low quality food seemed to be all they were worth. We chose instead to define them by who they are, their skills, their stories, their lives and their strengths, not by their deficits or weaknesses. And they deserved the very best we could offer. Our experience has shown that focussing on strengths and mutuality values

people and helps to create a sense of belonging and community. Members are happy to come along to a positive, welcoming place where they play a part and are able to grow as people, increasing in confidence and self-esteem. In time, most move on but they often return to share good news – a new baby, a job, a new home.

Nobody quite knows how the Food Co-operative will develop in the future, but the lessons so far are plain to see: every person matters and brings their own strengths and qualities to the table so that together we can achieve more than we could

ever do alone or even imagine in our wildest dreams. And in doing this each of us is blessed by the other. This is the better way that we seek and everyone involved in the Bensham Community Food Co-op tries to live this out in the way we treat each other and in the way we work together.

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Ollie Batchelor lives in Gateshead and has worked most of his life in the social care sector, focussing on addictions, in London, Edinburgh and the North East. He was a member of the Newcastle Fairness Commission and is a trustee of Soul Food Spaces, Lankelly Chase Foundation and Just Meditation.