How to evaluate asset-based approaches in an asset-based way

Principles from Evaluation Support Scotland

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eSS Evaluation Support Scotland

01 Why write this paper?

People in the third sector and funders tell us that they need to evaluate their asset-based work for funders, policy-makers and for their own improvement.

But they face the challenge of how to reconcile the need for evidence of impact of asset-based programmes, whilst maintaining informal approaches in practice. They need to show the link between improved connectedness, confidence and relationships and hard outcomes funders often demand. The desire to 'investigate' what works can be a barrier to nurturing natural and trusting relationships. The ideal is for communities to be involved appropriately at all stages of the evaluation process rather than be 'test subjects'. ESS wanted to address these challenges and show that evaluation **can** be done in line with asset-based activities and values.

At an event we facilitated in 2015, we asked practitioners and funders:

<p align="center">***"What would you like help with?"***</p>

"An evaluation approach that is owned by community but still consistent"

"Share practice and have time to focus on evaluation – more opportunities to discuss"

"Tracking change over time"

"Distil learning across all asset-based projects"

"Creative approaches"

"How to involve community meaningfully in analysis"

Who is the paper for?
We are mostly writing for people in third sector or community groups who want to use evaluation to improve their practice and report to others. The paper might interest funders and policy-makers.

We are drawing from experiences of working with people doing asset-based work. It is not a 'how to' guide and it does not attempt to explain the theory of asset-based approaches. You can find that elsewhere. We aim to provide ideas about approaches to think about when evaluating asset-based work.
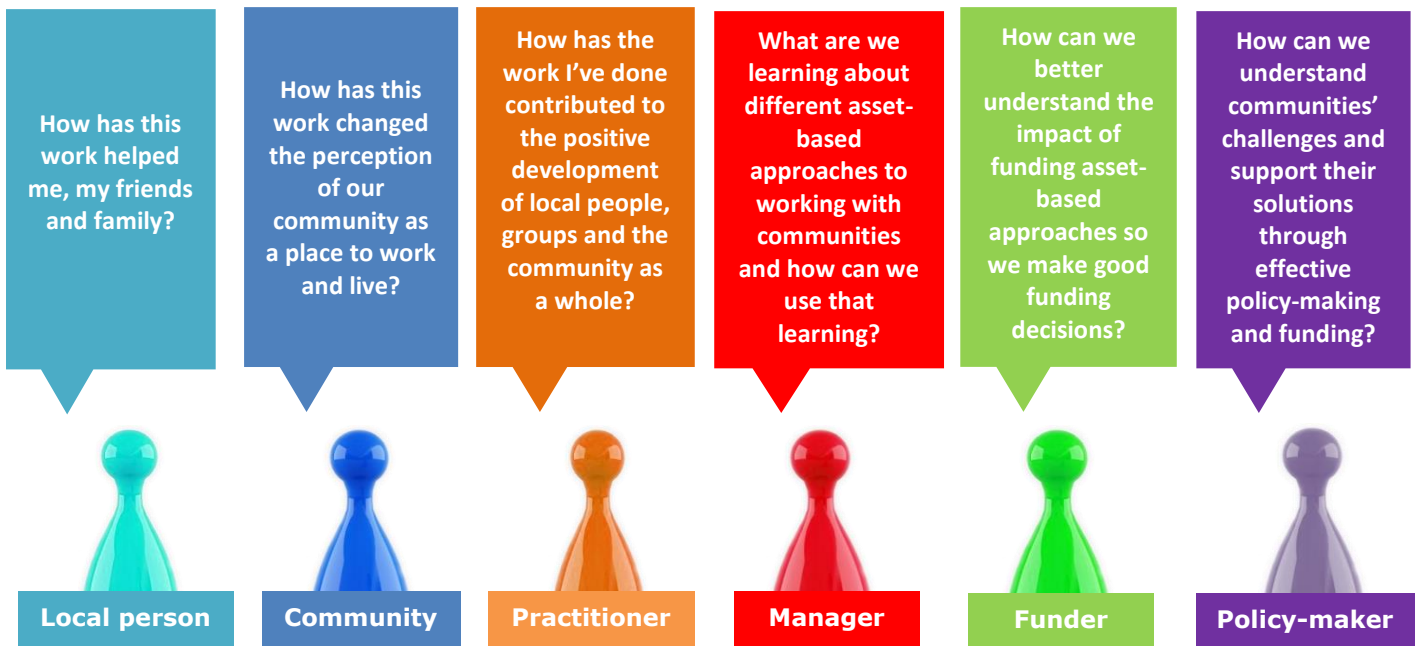
What are we talking about?
We are drawing on the definition from the *Glasgow Centre for Population Health*:

> *"Asset-based approaches emphasise the need to redress the balance between meeting needs and nurturing the strengths and resources of people and communities. They are ways of valuing and building on the skills, successes and strengths of individuals and communities, which focus on the positive capacity of individuals and communities rather than solely on their needs, deficits and problems."* [1]

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[1] See: http://www.gcph.co.uk/work_themes/theme_4_assets_and_resilience

02 Setting the framework for evaluation

Firstly we have to decide **who cares** about the impact of asset-based approaches – so we can use evaluation to answer their questions. Some examples might be:

How has this work helped me, my friends and family?	How has this work changed the perception of our community as a place to work and live?	How has the work I've done contributed to the positive development of local people, groups and the community as a whole?	What are we learning about different asset-based approaches to working with communities and how can we use that learning?	How can we better understand the impact of funding asset-based approaches so we make good funding decisions?	How can we understand communities' challenges and support their solutions through effective policy-making and funding?
Local person	**Community**	**Practitioner**	**Manager**	**Funder**	**Policy-maker**

In reality evidence of good stuff happening takes time to emerge. **Building a logic model** helps tell the story of a project or programme in a diagram and a few simple words. It shows a causal connection between the situation you are responding to, what you do (activities) and how this makes a difference for individuals and communities (outcomes). You don't need to use the words 'logic model'. You could call it **vision for our community**, or the **changes we'd like to see**. Some people say **theory of change**. As you capture evidence of change you can use your model as an anchor or a framework for analysis.

> *But wait a minute … isn't a logic model totally counter to the whole ethos of asset-based approaches? Maybe…but any good asset-based or community development work will involve asking people what they would like to do and what they think that will achieve so you will have some activities and outcomes – even if those change over time.*

Logic model example

Situation	Activities	Outcomes		
		Short	**Medium**	**Long**
Community X is hard hit by austerity and wants to become a thriving area once more where people have greater control over their lives and services	Consult with local people	Better understanding of area	Stronger trust and community relationships	Community is better connected
	Support ideas to form groups and plan events	Increased opportunities for community activities	Greater participation in community activities	Community has more activities, resources
	Recruit volunteers			
	Support people getting their voices heard		Volunteers have increased skills and confidence	Local people have more say over their lives and services

03 Principles

Drawing from ESS's experience working in this field, here are 10 principles to think about when planning or doing evaluation in the context of asset-based approaches. The principles are **not** in order of importance.

1. Involve people in evaluation ... proportionately

People may have limited time and resources to be involved in asset-based work itself, never mind evaluation. But don't decide that for them. The people you work with should still decide for themselves. Ownership is important.

ESS's '[Why Bother Involving People in Evaluation?'](#) has a 'Spectrum of Involvement'. This is about the different degrees to which organisations/projects can involve people they work with in evaluation. This spectrum corresponds to the degree of commitment required from the organisation and the people they work with.

Young people from Time to Shine Arts Project at an evaluation residential

Why Bother Involving People in Evaluation? launch event

2. Gather evidence where people actually are

'Sticky places' is a phrase used by [Faith in Community Scotland](#) to describe places such as cafés, community centres or church halls where people naturally share information, **stick** together and form relationships. These places give opportunities for meaningful, unobtrusive evaluation and the findings may actually be more authentic.

More generally, make it easy for people to get involved: think about locations, timings, accessibility and reimbursement.

Trust and relationship building is a central aspect of *doing* asset-based approaches: it's a slow process; it's not a one size fits all approach; it depends on individual personalities and collective relationships. Therefore, relationships should be equally important when *evaluating* asset-based approaches. Building trust and having honest conversations with people is crucial for effectively capturing what's going on.

3. Keep it simple – Don't treat communities like a laboratory

Parachuting in with shiny new methods and tools often acts as a barrier to building authentic relationships, with people feeling 'done to'. Instead explore what strengths and creativity exists with the people you are working with and include them when deciding on appropriate evaluation tools.

Connectors in the community should be able to observe and capture stories as a matter of course, better still, involve key local people.

4. More words and stories than numbers

Asset-based approaches are informal by nature so the evaluation has to be too. Asset-based evaluation will involve more qualitative (words and stories) than quantitative (numbers) data and evidence. So let's just accept that!

But that doesn't mean "wishy washy". It needs to be *flexible* but still have some *structure* and *focus* as illustrated by the logic model approach on page 2.

5. Hold the outcomes lightly

When doing asset-based work, outcomes often *emerge* rather than being decided at the start. It defeats the purpose if you over-plan your evaluation outcomes or impose too much structure before you know what the community wants and aspires to.

But there are some outcomes that you and the community are *likely* to want to see and you *can* look for from the start. You might not want to use these exact words but examples could be:

Communities will have hopes and dreams about what they want to work towards. You don't have to use the word 'outcomes'. You could word it as "what difference do you want to make or see?"

People recognise and develop their strengths	People have a stronger sense of purpose and identity	People are more involved and included	People are more able to do things for themselves

There are also **processes** that make for good asset-based work. It is important to evaluate whether these processes are happening or not. The kind of things someone who works in an asset-based way should be doing (and so could be measured) might include:

Example process outcomes:

We have a more authentic understanding of what local people want

There is increased trust between local people and our workers

- Looking for and valuing what the people you are working with are good at
- Giving – and asking for– honesty and respect
- Encouraging the person or community to do things for themselves
- Bringing people together to do practical things and have fun.

6. Be open to the unintended/unknown

As you might not be imposing too many structured outcomes from the start you might not know exactly what data to collect. So record in a light touch way what's happening, what people are saying and doing. Don't be too quick to add meaning and analysis. Indeed people should make sense of their own changes so involve the people you work with in data analysis if you can.

> I'll get all the information I can now and decide how to use it later

This cartoon would normally be used to illustrate how NOT to do evaluation but in asset-based approaches there is some truth in it. We think there's a shift from focused data collection to focused analysis. In the early phase of your work, collect lots of information where you can – try and track the story and THEN decide what it means. However that doesn't mean ditching outcomes altogether (as explained at point 5.)

> **Example:** The **'Everyone has a story'** project (managed by Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland) involved ESS co-developing a reflection tool with practitioners to capture young people's experiences of their parents 'recovering' from drugs and alcohol addiction. These 'experiences' were reflected on by the team afterwards as well as a young people's steering group. Read more **here**.

7. Seek different versions of the 'truth'

There's a risk that evaluation is dominated by 'usual suspects'. Where possible, ensure that lesser heard voices have a say. It's important to be comfortable with different versions of 'truths' or contradictions in order to ensure you have different perspectives. This doesn't mean you have to actively avoid the "usual suspects".

> At the analysis stage not all conclusions were consistent. Practitioners improved their active listening skills and became more aware of making assumptions.

It's tempting to create a positive narrative so actively create a picture of the downs as well as the ups.

8. Build reflection into everyday

In asset-based approaches, even more than in other work, evaluation needs to be ongoing. That means building reflection into normal work/practice and making it a live process. Asset-based workers should make space to share examples of what is working well with each other, what they are learning and to reflect on the story of change over time. If you are a lone worker then finding a community of practice or safe space to share with others could be crucial.

Indeed, the worker can draw on the assets of the people she or he is working with and ask local people to unpick and explore, what parts of the worker's (or others) practice helped or hindered the achievement of any outcomes. Scary but helpful!

Shift mind-set from 'evaluation as a burden' to 'learning as an asset'. Use words like *feedback* or *reflection* or *learning* might be more useful than *evaluation*. Overall collecting and reflecting on evidence should be incorporated into everyday practice, so that it becomes an ongoing process of 'learning' rather than an additional burden of 'reporting' at the end of a programme.

Overall asset-based programmes have found that some 'structured reflection' outside of the day to day work is essential in terms of impact and learning.

9. Respond to different learning styles

Everyone learns and reflects differently so personalise the evaluation approach depending on abilities and preferences. That's true for asset-based workers and it's true for people you are working with. Have a suite of simple to use tools and techniques that suit a range of people and situations. Also be aware of any additional needs or sensitivities like literacy or visual impairment.

10. Don't be precious about 'need'

Some of the policy rhetoric about asset-based approaches suggest that we no longer are supposed to talk about 'need' or 'problems' when undertaking asset-based work. In ESS's experience this is not an anxiety on 'on the ground'.

Indeed it is essential from an evaluation perspective to record where a community is at an early stage in the project in order to have a starting point for any changes. This starting point doesn't have to be wholly problem focused. It must include assets and strengths. But if a community doesn't have a chance to say "this is what we'd like to see changed or different" then it's hard to know whether anything HAS improved.

So we think it is OK to talk about problems at the planning stage as this helps to shape your approach, gain credibility with local people, and your work will then be more asset based.

One tool to help you unpack 'what is the problem you're trying to solve?' is the situation tree. This enables you to state what seems to be the main problem and explore both the causes and effects of that problem. Once this is done, you create a solution tree where you can identify activities and outcomes that address the identified issues.

Example: Inspiring Scotland's Link Up Programme produced a situation tree. You can view it **here**.

Some of these 10 principles were inspired by Áine Lovedale (Policy and Learning Adviser at Big Lottery Fund) who joined us for a 'mini-secondment'. She looked at how, as a team, we go about evaluating asset based approaches in an asset based way. You can read her blog about it here.

04   Learning from similar work

This short section refers to a few other pieces of work we find helpful. It is not comprehensive and we apologise for anything we have missed.

Action Research:
Action research involves researchers working alongside local people and professionals so everyone can try out, develop and learn from different ways of doing things. It recognises strengths and assets as a starting point for inquiry and builds resilience and capacity through the process of research itself. As one example see the work undertaken by Cathy Sharp (Research for Real) with Iriss.

Appreciative Inquiry:
Appreciative enquiry recognises strengths and builds on the positives. A good example of this approach is the Animating Assets programme, delivered by the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) and the Glasgow Centre for Population Health (GCPH) (March 2014 - June 2015). It tested asset-based approaches to health and wellbeing in numerous communities across Scotland. The diagram (right) shows the "4 Ds of Appreciative Inquiry" from 'Animating Assets' final report.

1. Discover
2. Dream
3. Design
4. Destiny
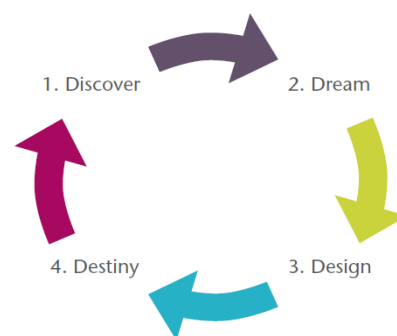
Learning from Link Up:
Link Up is an asset-based programme running in ten communities in Scotland and it focuses on *people as contributors.* By doing things together and helping each other, individuals and communities become more resilient, happier and better able to face some of the challenges they face. Its intention is to test and explore two principles of asset-based approaches: 'Connecting People' and 'Giving and Confidence'. Please see Link Up's webpage for useful learning and evaluation reports.

> **Please get in touch**
> If you have experience of evaluating asset-based approaches – or would like help to do so: info@evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk