

'This feels more like social work should'

There are signs more community-led approaches to social care can improve outcomes and staff morale. **Andy McNicoll** visited Leeds to hear how one such model is helping social workers do what they do best...



Social workers and voluntary sector colleagues at the New Wortley centre

The New Wortley Community Centre is a hive of activity in one of the most deprived parts of Leeds. Hundreds of people visit, popping in for a cup of tea in the cafe or joining everything from lunch clubs and music groups to debt advice or IT sessions.

These days a local team of social workers hold appointments here twice a week and regularly link people into the centre's projects. Two years ago, they didn't know it existed. It's a sign of how a social care system focused on eligibility and care management can lose sight of what's going on in the communities it serves.

The move to hold the social work sessions, known as 'Talking Points', at this centre and others across Leeds is one small, but significant, part of changes to the way adult social care in the city works.

The aim, staff say, is to "reclaim" social work. To reconnect it with communities and work with people's strengths and assets, not just eligibility. And to meet needs in ways that people actually value, not simply directing them to traditional services.

The changes were borne out of concerns social workers shared with Cath Roff, Leeds' director of adult services, and deputy director Shona McFarlane, a few years back.

When the pair visited teams, they found staff felt like the "border patrol", policing ever tightening eligibility thresholds. They saw it wasn't a satisfying way to work or for people to get support and asked social workers to come up with ideas for changes they'd like to see.

"Cath gave us the direction – go away, look at your jobs and as long as it's legal and within budget come up with recommendations," says Rhona Neilson, a social worker who manages a team covering the city's Armley district.

"They put it back to the front line. It was led from the bottom – that's been incredibly important."

Sarah Hearn, another of the Armley team, says cutting the bureaucracy facing practitioners was key.

"There were so many processes and hoops to jump through it felt like you were constantly kind of deferring work, rather than helping," she says.

'They put it back to the front line. It was led from the bottom'

"We wanted to strip that right back, to get the time to work with people properly and get to know them."

The Armley team piloted a new approach based on the social workers' ideas. Most people are now invited to a social work appointment at the centre, not stuck on a long waiting list for home visits.

Instead of running through tick-box questions, social workers talk to people about their lives, their strengths and interests (not just their care needs) and are backed to find options to help, not just focus on their eligible care needs. The conversations are recorded on a two-sided form with two free text boxes – a far cry from the 27-page assessment form they were used to.

Variants of this "strengths-based" model are now being used by 28 teams in Leeds, with Talking Points held in venues like churches, libraries and health centres. Other teams who've implemented the changes say they're noticing a difference, particularly in assessments.

"You're talking about what's personal to people, it's not tick-box. It takes so much less time too, so you've more opportunity to actually go and research ideas to help," says Amy Sowerby, a social worker in the city's Pudsey district.

"After qualifying three years ago I worked elsewhere for a while. That felt like a bit of backwards step. Now I feel I'm



Teresa is a community worker at the centre



Social work team manager Joyce Griffiths

doing what I learned – it feels more like how social work is meant to happen."

Joyce Griffiths, a team manager in the Seacroft area, says the changes benefit managers too.

"You can actually visualise the conversation, I feel like I was there. I've personally never really had that as a manager looking at documentation, not regularly anyway."

While social workers will still visit people at home when that's needed, they see benefit in using the community venues where possible. When people feel isolated, it's often a good starting point to help them meet people or see what's on in their areas. Being more connected to local and voluntary projects – not just council-commissioned ones – is also helping the social workers come up with options to help people beyond the traditional menu of care services.

Small things can make a huge difference. For example, one of the Leeds teams worked with a woman who'd had repeat referrals for years. During an appointment at one of the community venues she told social workers she'd like to volunteer there. They made it happen and say it's made a huge difference to her wellbeing.

Fiona Martin and Shona Dixon work in the council's learning disability services. They've developed their 'strengths-based' model in line with a user-led strategy and say a key part is working with other organisations to promote independence.

Shona mentions an example where she worked with the board of a local rugby club and other agencies so that a man could go to the club when he wanted, rather than having to rely on others to take him there.

"It means he can go on his own but there's a network of support if he needs it. You need to be creative, not just think about funded services. Thinking about all aspects of the person, not just the 'need' in terms of care and support.

"There are things services might not deem a 'need'. But for a person it might absolutely be a need to be able to go to a rugby club and have a drink with their friends. We should be facilitating that as far as possible."

Fiona agrees. "It's about helping with what is important to that person. A care package is part of it but it's more than just looking at numbers of hours of care."

Leeds is one of nine community-led social work projects supported by social inclusion charity the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi). An evaluation found services had seen waiting times fall, staff morale improve and better outcomes being achieved at "the same or lower cost".

The last point touches on a question often posed when councils announce plans to introduce "new ways of working" – is this just a guise for cuts?

Leeds faces the same funding pressures as other councils and hopes the "strengths-based" model can help deliver savings in the future. But social workers say this isn't the motivation behind the changes or their day-to-day work.

Amy feels the conversation record can actually offer social workers a much better way to justify their support recommendations. Sarah says she's never felt pressured to "do this instead because it's cheaper" and believes her team is getting better outcomes by finding the best solutions for people, not those that are easiest for services to use.

"It's a hard thing to admit as a social worker but actually before we sometimes probably worked in ways that were convenient to us," she says. "By putting in a service I could send someone away with my conscience clear that they had something in place even if, reflecting back, it might not have been the best thing for them."

"The things we're connecting people to now, we're not doing it because it costs less, we're doing it because it's a better option."

Rhona says the level of charges for traditional services means a lot of people want alternatives too. "So to meet need we are having to be more creative anyway – I think that's where a lot of social workers are getting more job satisfaction. We're trying things we wouldn't have before."

Sarah feels social workers now have more time to come up with those ideas with people. Before, she says, things often felt non-stop. "You did a visit, put in some support, and moved on. Now it feels like you've got the headspace to do a much better job."

Joyce says her team feel like they're much more part of the community since the changes. "It has reinvigorated people. They're excited about social work again."

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