

Perspectives on strengths-based approaches: social workers, commissioners and managers

Plain English summary of research findings

What the research is about

A new approach to social work and social care services has been developed, called a 'strengths' or 'asset' based approach. This means having conversations with people about their skills, interests and resources to consider how they can help each person's situation. It contrasts with the 'deficit' approach, which starts by looking at what people are lacking or need.

Examples of people's 'strengths' or 'assets' include personal resources (such as family and friends that may help them), social networks (such as a book club, social club or faith group), or community resources (such as a library, community centre, or a gym) that can be used to enable people to live the best life that they can.

Why the research is important

Although strengths-based approaches are popular, there is little understanding of how they have been adopted and used in social work and social care in England. We gathered the views of professionals who are involved in (or responsible for) strengths-based approaches – the decision makers, organisers and managers.

The results from this work provide insight into how people are using strengths-based approaches in social work and social care provision,

the impact for people accessing services, and the impact on the people who provide them.

What we did

We invited participants to take part in an online survey between December 2020 and October 2021. People who took part in the survey were employed by a mixture of local authorities and included: county councils; district councils; London boroughs; metropolitan districts; unitary authorities. Three were also employed by the NHS.

People who agreed to be contacted for interview were invited to discuss their experiences further and give more detail about comments they made in the online survey. Interviews were conducted from August 2021 to December 2021. The survey was completed by thirty-two participants, ten of whom took part in an interview.

Public Advisors

Two public involvement and engagement advisors were involved and helped us throughout the work. They looked at and commented on the survey, interview questions, and documents for recruiting participants as well as the reporting of the results. A project advisory group was formed and included social work and social care experts from practitioner and academic backgrounds.

What we found out

Participants reported adopting strengths-based approaches in a fluid, flexible way. While participants had a sense of what a strengths-based approach was, many also said that it was not clearly defined and was hard to articulate. Generally participants agreed that strengths-based approaches are relevant for all those accessing social work or social care services. However, some participants suggested that they may be less suitable for people with severe mental health problems or severe learning disabilities and/or people

in crisis. This was because the urgency of action may sometimes necessitate a more prescriptive approach.

Participants spoke about the impact of using a strengths-based approach in their area of work. This included:

- Improved reported wellbeing for people accessing services and satisfaction with services;
- Enriched interactions with people accessing services – especially social workers – (greater empathy, trust and better rapport);
- Increased autonomy for social care practitioners to be creative and innovative in their work with people;
- A less prescriptive view of support encouraging greater independence and improved sense of ‘self-worth’ reported for people accessing services;
- Reduced bureaucracy in organisational processes (e.g. conducting care assessments; triaging first contacts to appropriate support or services).

Participants reported a number of challenges related to adopting strengths-based approaches:

- Incompatibility of existing systems and organisational structures;
- Workload pressures and a depleted workforce;
- Limited resources including scarcity of community ‘assets’ (such as community centres);
- Applying this approach at crisis point;
- Challenging a dependency culture and reluctance to engage with strengths-based practice.

Participants cited strong leadership, organisational ‘buy-in’ and trust between all individuals (from senior managers to practitioners) as key to successful adoption and implementation.

What the findings mean

Survey respondents and interviewees were broadly optimistic about strengths-based approaches. Many described the positive impact it was having on their work, and on their ability to help and support people more effectively.

Whilst in general participants had a very positive view of strengths-based approaches and could identify a range of benefits resulting from their adoption, there remains only limited evidence of its effectiveness as a model. The challenge for researchers - and to some extent practitioners - is how to meaningfully capture the nuanced impact of such a multi-dimensional approach. The challenge for policy is how to operationalise and replicate the benefits in different settings.

The principles and values associated with adopting a strengths-based approach are consistent with providing high quality social work and social care. The key requirement is that a strengths-based approach has to be at the centre of practice, and for this to happen meaningfully, and be effective, it has to be underpinned by organisational and infrastructural commitment and support.

Together these results can help to inform the development of an appropriate method to evaluate strengths-based approaches in adult social care and social work in England, and help policymakers to make evidence-informed decisions about investment in strengths-based approaches.