

# Enabling social action

## SECTION C

# Leadership and culture change



Department  
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Enabling social action requires a different kind of leadership: facilitative, engaged, and asset-based. Leaders like this in the public sector – including elected members, directors, officers, commissioners, and frontline workers – will promote genuine partnerships across the public, private and voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors. They consistently co-produce with citizens focusing on strengths and aspirations (assets), not just needs (deficits). They seek to facilitate change, support residents to define and improve outcomes, and celebrate social action. This creates a cultural shift from trying to fix problems and needs for people, towards working together in equal partnerships with people to find solutions.

Achieving this shift in culture and leadership involves embedding the principles of co-production, applying asset-based approaches to all activities and rewarding the associated leadership qualities. It helps to have a narrative of social action shared by leaders across sectors and organisations; and to offer training to leaders in how they can have a different kind of conversation with citizens.

In this section, you will find the following tools:

## **C1 Communicating about social action: Answers to frequently asked questions**

A tool providing answers to common questions to support public sector leaders in understanding and describing social action to internal and external audiences

## **C2 Six principles of co-production**

Based on detailed study of effective co-production, this tool details the principles that public sector leaders should apply in their everyday work to enable social action, with examples applications. These principles are a useful foundation on which to build social action

## **C3 Assets over deficits: A way of thinking and working**

A tool summarising the Foot and Hopkins's guide to the 'asset approach', describing asset-based thinking and how public sector leaders can shift towards asset-based working<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Foot, J. & Hopkins, T. (2010). A glass half-full: How an asset approach can improve community health and well-being. Retrieved from: [www.local.gov.uk/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=bf-034d2e-7d61-4fac-b37e-f39dc3e2f1f2&groupId=10180](http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=bf-034d2e-7d61-4fac-b37e-f39dc3e2f1f2&groupId=10180)

## C4 Social action: Conversation on the doorstep

A cartoon encapsulating the culture shift in places where social action has become a priority. This can be used to help explain what it looks like for the public sector to take a social action approach

## C5 Pitfalls to avoid

A tool summarising the pitfalls that are commonly encountered by public sector leaders working to change culture to enable social action

These external resources also provide useful content on leadership and culture change:

- [The Twenty-First Century Public Servant – Catherine Needham and Catherine Mangan](#). Based on interviews with 40 public sector leaders, this paper describes the skills, attributes, and values of effective public servants in an age of constrained budgets, increased localism, and greater demand for user voice and control
- [The 21st Century Councillor – Catherine Mangan \*et al.\*](#) Based on interviews with 68 councillors and 18 officers, this report describes the new roles played by councillors in the context of changing citizens' expectations, new technologies, and financial challenges
- [The Deal for the future - Wigan Council](#). A tool used by Wigan Council to promote culture change among staff and residents as part of 'The Deal', an informal agreement between the council and Wigan citizens to work together to create a better borough. It is a useful example of how local authorities can go about transitioning to a social action approach
- [Conversation tool: a guide to support assessments – Wigan Council](#). A guide for frontline staff to support asset-based conversations with residents with social care needs
- [A glass half-full: how an asset approach can improve community health and well-being – Jane Foot and Trevor Hopkins](#). A guide to understanding and developing an asset-approach – this is the original version of the tool entitled 'Assets over deficits: a way of thinking and working'

# C1: Communicating about social action: Answers to frequently asked questions

Several questions frequently arise when public sector leaders engage in supporting and enabling social action locally. A range of stakeholders may ask them: from other public sector leaders, to members of the private and voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sectors, and citizens. This tool answers these frequently asked questions, to support public sector leaders in understanding and describing social action to internal and external audiences.

## 1. What is the purpose of social action?

Social action is about people coming together to help improve their lives and solve the important problems in their communities. Its purpose is to achieve better outcomes, improve local environments, and transform public services – by engaging and enhancing the commitment and skill of citizens.

When people are supported to take action on the issues they care about, everyone stands to benefit: the people taking action themselves, the direct beneficiaries of their activities, the public services that are working towards the same goals, and the wider community in which the social action takes place. Places that have enabled social action have reported that it has improved a range of important local outcomes: strengthened social networks, reduced isolation, reduced pressure on acute services, and improved mental health outcomes. Taking part in social action is itself also associated with higher levels of wellbeing, confidence, and skills.

The Office for Civil Society's discussion paper 'Social Action: Harnessing the Potential' provides further analysis of the benefits of social action and how it can help government respond to long-term challenges.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Will social action reduce the demand for services?

Social action is not a quick fix. Places that have enabled social action at scale have seen reductions in the need for acute services such as domiciliary care and in-patient mental health services, but this has taken time, improving outcomes and facilitating savings over three to five years.

<sup>2</sup> Cabinet Office. (2015). Social Action: Harnessing the Potential. Retrieved from: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-action-harnessing-the-potential](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-action-harnessing-the-potential)

Social action provides an alternative, preventative approach to conventional demand management. It can help keep people well and improve their quality of life, which in turn can prevent them from requiring intensive and expensive forms of support and care. Over time, it can help address the dual challenge of constrained resources and rising demand, but the primary reason for enabling social action – what matters most for local people – is to improve their health and wellbeing.

### **3. Is social action about the public sector withdrawing and leaving it to residents?**

The public sector has a key role to play in local areas and social action does not change this. What may change is the way the public sector goes about fulfilling its role. For example, making the most of the commitment and expertise of local people involves re-designing services with social action in mind, and helping to shape an environment which encourages and enables residents to take action on issues they care about, removing barriers.

### **4. Do we need to enable social action – will it not happen naturally?**

Some kinds of social action happen naturally – and they have happened in many places. But the extent to which social action is joined up, effective, and thriving depends on how much encouragement, support, and leadership it has in any local area. This in turn affects how social action impacts positively on local outcomes.

### **5. What can be done to enable social action?**

There are at least three ways by which the public sector can enable social action and unlock its potential. First, by connecting with existing social action and planning any public sector activities with an understanding of what is already happening in an area. Second, by seeding new social action that can help create more social action-based options for people needing support. Third, by creating the right local conditions for social action to flourish, removing barriers and making concerted efforts to reduce inequalities which make it harder for some groups to participate than others.

## 6. Can social action work in deprived areas?

The amount of social action happening in an area is not determined by income, wealth, or class. That said, participation in social action can be harder for some citizens than others. If the public sector is alert to this, it can align policies to remove barriers to participation by, for example, providing expenses for volunteers where feasible, opening up community centres for use, and making sure everyone knows when and how social action has delivered benefits to local people. Public sector leaders can use the checklist in Section E (Table 1) to think through the range of resources and conditions needed for social action to thrive in an area.

## C2: Six principles of co-production

Co-production is defined as 'a relationship where professionals and citizens share power to design, plan, and deliver support together, recognising that both partners have vital contributions to make in order to improve quality of life for people and communities.'<sup>3</sup> It involves the transformation of power and control, and the active involvement of citizens in many aspects of designing, commissioning, and delivering services. To enable social action, public sector leaders are encouraged to consider applying the principles of co-production to their everyday work – in commissioning, in the design and delivery of services, and in working with citizens to make decisions and develop solutions to local challenges.

Table 1 describes the six principles of co-production. These are the foundation stones of co-production, consistently present in the best examples of co-production, nationally and internationally.<sup>4</sup>

3 Definition of co-production developed by the National Co-production Critical Friends, January 2013.

4 Boyle, D., Coote, A., Sherwood C. & Slay J. (2010). Co-production: *Right here, Right now*. London: Nesta.

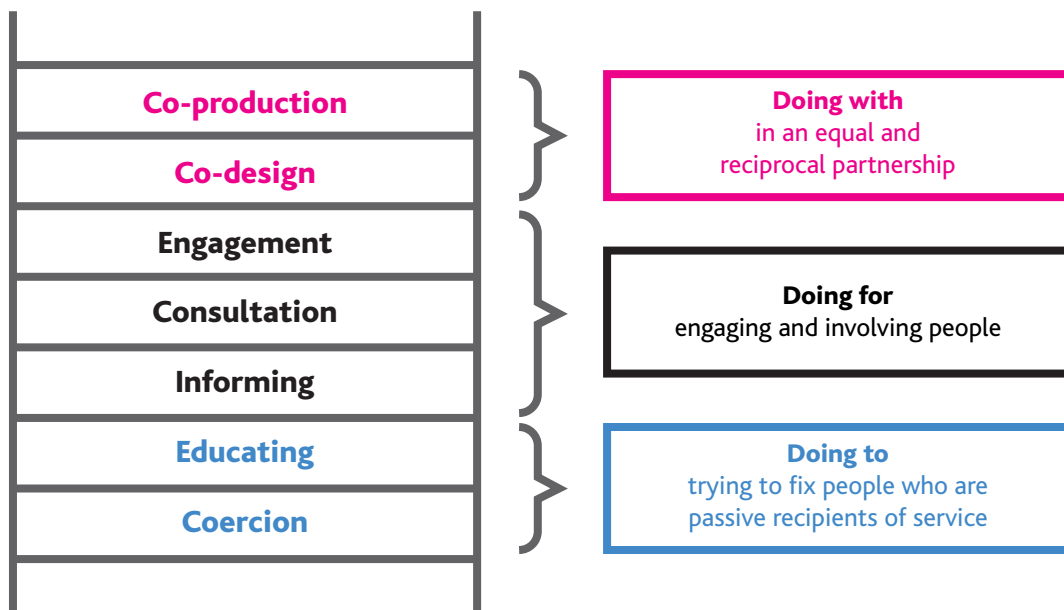
**Table 1. The six principles of co-production.**

<b>Principle</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example application</b>
<b>Taking an assets-based approach</b>	Transforming the way people are perceived, so that they are seen not as passive recipients of services and burdens on the system, but as equal partners in designing and delivering services.	Commissioners use asset mapping and appreciative inquiry with citizens to create a rich picture of human and physical assets that can be brought together in new ways to achieve outcomes, going beyond the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, which tends to focus on local problems such as ill-health and deprivation. This was done in Wakefield, where they undertook a Joint Strategic Assets Assessment. <sup>5</sup>
<b>Building on people's existing capabilities</b>	Altering the delivery model of the public sector from a deficit approach to one that provides opportunities to recognise and grow people's capabilities and actively support them to put these to use at an individual and community level.	Social workers and other frontline staff ask people using services about their interests, skills, and aspirations – not just their needs – during support assessments. This can lead to people being referred to community activities and supported to engage in social action, growing their skills, confidence, and connections.
<b>Reciprocity and mutuality</b>	Offering people a range of incentives to work in reciprocal relationships with professionals and with each other, where there are mutual responsibilities and expectations.	Commissioners and citizens listen to each other in designing services, defining their mutual expectations. Time credits are used to recognise the time people have given to support the delivery of public services.
<b>Peer support networks</b>	Engaging peer and personal networks alongside professionals as the best way of transferring knowledge.	User-led groups are offered small grants to facilitate peer-to-peer support to promote the independence and wellbeing of people with learning disabilities.
<b>Breaking down barriers</b>	Removing the distinction between professionals and recipients, and between producers and consumers of services, by reconfiguring the way services are developed and delivered.	Public sector officers co-design outcomes frameworks for services and the local strategy for social action with citizens, working with people in equal partnership and in community venues on their terms.
<b>Facilitating rather than delivering</b>	Enabling public service agencies to become catalysts.	Members and officers make it easier for people to take social action. For example, by including a type of social action – such as a peer support network – as part of commissioned service contracts.



Co-production initiates a shift from doing to and doing for citizens, to doing with, as described by Figure 1. The ladder shows co-production as part of a continuum: as you go up the ladder, power is shared more equally between people providing and using services, and you get closer to co-production.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1. Ladder of co-production.<sup>6</sup>



Source: NEF, Commissioning for Outcomes and Co-production.

**Doing to:** Services that are not so much intended to benefit the recipients, but to educate or cure them. Recipients are not invited to participate in the design or delivery of the service; their role is limited to being a fairly passive recipient of messages and services, while professionals hold all the power, and make all the decisions, within the service.

**Doing for:** People using services are involved in some form, but this participation may still be within clear parameters set by professionals. Services are often designed by professionals with the recipient's best interests in mind, but people's involvement in the design and delivery of the services is constrained. People are only invited to

5 Greetham J. (no date). Growing Communities from the Inside Out: Piloting an asset based approach to JSNAs within the Wakefield District: Method and Findings. LGA, NHS Wakefield and Wakefield Council. Retrieved from: [www.local.gov.uk/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=679e8e67-6d41-49a9-a8e1-452959f4f564&groupId=10180](http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=679e8e67-6d41-49a9-a8e1-452959f4f564&groupId=10180)

6 Adapted from Arnstein. S. (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation. Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35, 4.

be heard; they are not given the power to make sure that their ideas or opinions shape decisions.

**Doing with:** A much deeper level of service-user involvement, which shifts power towards people. Co-designing a service involves sharing decision-making power with people. This means that people's voices must be heard, valued, debated, and then – most importantly – acted on. Co-production goes one step further by enabling people to play roles in delivering the services that they have designed. In practice, this can take many forms, from peer support and mentoring to running everyday activities or making decisions about how an organisation is run.

## C3: Assets over deficits: A way of thinking and working

Enabling social action requires a culture shift towards asset-based ways of thinking and working, and away from thinking primarily about deficits. The problems, needs, and issues of an area and its people are deficits, whereas assets are the strengths, skills, and knowledge of local people, their networks and connections, and the range of resources that exist in the public, private, and community sector.

If there is a lot of social action in an area already, this is a significant asset that public sector leaders can incorporate into their planning and commissioning. If there is not a lot of social action in an area, public sector leaders can use asset-based approaches to promote its development by bringing together local assets in new ways.

### WHAT IS AN ASSET?<sup>7</sup>

An asset is any of the following:

- Practical skills, capacity, and knowledge of local residents
- Passions and interests of local residents that give them energy for change
- Networks and connections in a community, including friendships and neighbourliness – known as 'social capital'
- Effectiveness of local community and voluntary associations
- Resources of public, private, and third sector organisations that are available to support a community
- Physical and economic resources of a place that enhance wellbeing

7 Adapted from Foot, J. & Hopkins, T. (2010). A glass half-full: How an asset approach can improve community health and well-being. Retrieved from: [www.local.gov.uk/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=bf-034d2e-7d61-4fac-b37e-f39dc3e2f1f2&groupId=10180](http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=bf-034d2e-7d61-4fac-b37e-f39dc3e2f1f2&groupId=10180)

## THE CASE FOR ASSET-BASED WORKING

Research finds that asset-based approaches are effective at:

- Reducing health inequalities – by increasing people’s control over local decisions, strengthening participation, and building social capital<sup>8</sup>
- Improving wellbeing – by increasing control, social contact, and personal confidence<sup>9</sup>
- Strengthening community networks – by encouraging civic participation and citizen power, trust and solidarity between people, and reciprocal help<sup>10</sup>
- Supporting local expertise – by mobilising people to become champions of health, safety, education, leadership, creativity, and so on<sup>11</sup>

## ASSET-BASED THINKING

The shift in mindset needed to move from a deficit approach to asset-based thinking is captured in Table 2.

8 Marmot, M. (2010). Fair Society Healthy Lives. The Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post 2010. Retrieved from: [www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review](http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review)

9 National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE). (2008). Guidance on Community Engagement to improve health. Retrieved from: [www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph9](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph9)

10 Hothi, M. (2009). Neighbourliness + Empowerment = Wellbeing. London: Young Foundation.

11 Findings from Department of Health community programmes: health trainers, community health champions and cancer champions.

Table 2. Moving from a deficit approach to an asset approach.<sup>12</sup>

Where we are now – the deficit approach	Where an asset way of thinking takes us
Start with deficiencies and needs in the community.	Start with the assets in the community.
Respond to problems.	Identify opportunities and strengths.
Provide services to users.	Invest in people as citizens.
Emphasise the role of agencies.	Emphasise the role of civil society.
Focus on individuals.	Focus on communities/neighbourhoods and the common good.
See people as clients and consumers receiving services.	See people as citizens and co-producers with something to offer.
Treat people as passive and done to.	Help people to take control of their lives.
'Fix people'.	Support people to develop their potential.
Implement programmes as the answer.	See people as the answer.

## ASSET-BASED WORKING

An asset-based approach starts by asking questions and reflecting on what is already present:

- What makes us strong?
- What makes us healthy?
- What factors make us better able to cope in times of stress?
- What makes this a good place to be?
- What does the community do to improve outcomes?

12 Foot, J. & Hopkins, T. (2010). A glass half-full: How an asset approach can improve community health and well-being. Retrieved from: [www.local.gov.uk/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=bf-034d2e-7d61-4fac-b37e-f39dc3e2f1f2&groupId=10180](http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=bf-034d2e-7d61-4fac-b37e-f39dc3e2f1f2&groupId=10180)

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is one way of understanding, unlocking, and building up local assets. The ABCD Institute ([www.abcdinstitute.org](http://www.abcdinstitute.org)) suggests the key stages are:

1. Mapping or making an inventory of the capacities and assets in the area
2. Building relationships and connections between residents, and between residents and agencies, to change values and attitudes
3. Mobilising residents to become self-organising and active by sharing knowledge and resources and identifying common interests
4. Convening a core group of residents to identify, from asset mapping and mobilising activities, the key theme or issue that will inspire people to get organised and to create a vision and a plan
5. Levering outside resources only to do those things that the residents cannot do for themselves; they need to be in a position of strength in dealing with outside agencies

The theme or vision for revitalising the community needs to:

- Be concrete so that people know what they are aiming at and when they have achieved it
- Be achievable with community and other resources
- Bring people together and use their skills
- Reinforce their strengths and self-confidence

Other asset-based approaches include asset mapping and appreciative inquiry, which are described in Section D of this toolkit (tool D4).

## C4: Social action: Conversation on the doorstep

Figure 2 is a simple way of characterising three different scenarios. The first depicts a more traditional way for a councillor to interact with local residents. The second depicts a councillor abdicating responsibility and accountability for local problems. The third depicts a councillor taking a positive, social action approach to working with citizens to solve issues.

Figure 2. Conversation on the doorstep



## C5: Pitfalls to avoid

Table 3 summarises the pitfalls that are commonly encountered by public sector leaders working to change culture, commission for social action and create the conditions for social action. Resisting these pitfalls can prevent social action from becoming tokenistic or ineffective.

Table 3. Pitfalls to avoid.

Do	Don't
<p><b>Use co-production to bring together the best of both public sector and community expertise</b> Co-design and co-deliver activities with local people, and recognise that social action is not 'free'.</p>	<p><b>Expect communities to run services</b> It is unrealistic to expect people to run social care, housing, or health services without professional input and adequate resources.</p>
<p><b>Recognise that paid facilitators can increase the capacity of residents</b> to volunteer and support new groups to engage. Provide development support for organisations to help them seek funding from other sources.</p>	<p><b>Believe that all social action can eventually become self-sustaining</b> In many instances, it will continue to require some funding for staff to coordinate and facilitate activities.</p>
<p><b>Go beyond consultation and engagement</b> by recognising that sharing power between professionals and citizens can create a genuinely reciprocal partnership through co-design and co-production.</p>	<p><b>Mistake consultation, collaboration, or partnership for co-production</b> Partnerships and collaborations with colleagues in the public sector are important but they do not amount to genuine co-production.</p>
<p><b>Use practical examples of local social action</b> and conversations with people leading it as the starting point for strategic decisions.</p>	<p><b>Think about strategy without thinking about implementation</b> This can lead to an unrealistic high-level plan with absence of buy-in from people who will be relied on to implement local programmes.</p>
<p><b>Listen to citizens about their priorities</b> Use creative methods to engage them in an asset-based conversation.</p>	<p><b>Enable social action solely as a way of cutting costs</b> Social action is about improving outcomes, but it is unlikely to achieve this if it is being driven largely by the need to make public sector savings.</p>
<p><b>Define outcomes with residents through co-production</b> Be clear about what all participants want to achieve, what success looks like, and how it will be measured.</p>	<p><b>Work generically on social action without defining outcomes</b> This is unlikely to lead to clear measurable impact on public service outcomes that the public cares about.</p>



Part of Enabling social action – tools and resources developed by the  
New Economics Foundation in collaboration with the Office for Civil Society.  
Available from [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)

Department for  
Culture, Media & Sport  
4th Floor, 100 Parliament Street  
London SW1A 2BQ  
[www.gov.uk/dcms](http://www.gov.uk/dcms)

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[www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org)  
[info@neweconomics.org](mailto:info@neweconomics.org)  
+44 (0)20 7820 6300 @NEF  
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