

Working in partnership to learn about strengths- based working

Leeds City Council March 2021 to Jan 2022



Homeless Link

Working in partnership to learn about strengths-based working with Leeds City Council

Learning partnership as part of the Strengths-based Practice Toolkit Project 2020-2022

What was the starting point for Leeds City Council?

The vision of the commissioning team is to be a valued team working in partnership to commission high quality services which address health and social inequality and support people to live healthy, independent and fulfilled lives. As part of this process we have been looking to develop and improve the approach to commissioning, contract management and quality assurance. We wanted to explore how we could continue this development through adopting a strengths-based approach.

We recognise the importance of the client voice in ensuring that services are responsive to need and we look to ensure that people with lived experience are consulted prior to commissioning services. Developing open and honest relationships with our providers is a fundamental ethos of the team. We work collaboratively with our providers it is 'we' and #teamleeds not them and us. Developing trust with our providers ensures that communication, identification of problems, working together to put solutions in place is a fundamental part of our approach. Through our quality assurance process that we have developed (the QMF) the client voice is a key part of that and we expect our providers to embrace and evidence the client voice in what they deliver.

However, the approach is not necessarily consistent and time constraints and resources can prevent us from always achieving the desired level of consultation and co-production, particularly when it comes to the commissioning of services. So although the contract management side is reasonably strong, are we doing all we can at the front end of the commissioning cycle?

We were about to embark on the review and recommission of our street outreach service so we wanted to work through this alongside Homeless Link to help us understand the principles of strengths-based practice and how this could be practically adapted into our commissioning processes.

It was hoped that this would help us :

- Understand strengths-based practice
- Embed good practice
- Understand how strengths-based practice could practically be used within the commissioning process
- To work with Homeless link to help develop a relevant strengths-based commissioning toolkit
- Ultimately to help ensure that contracts are put in place which will better support people in Leeds.

What was the starting point for Homeless Link?

During the early phase of the Strengths-based toolkit project, it became clear that people working in the homelessness sector felt unable to fully step forwards with strengths-based

working as they felt constrained by the requirements of their commissioners. It was agreed early on that it would be key to learn more about commissioning and how this could be made to be more supportive of different approaches.

The project was designed to include working alongside two learning partners who would look to embed an element of strengths-based working. This would enable Homeless Link to develop and create resources that were based in the learnt experience of an organisation.

It was therefore decided that we should ideally partner with a commissioning team in order to learn more about the process and how it could become more strengths-based or at least, how it could become more supportive of organisations who were working in this way.

It was hoped that this would help us to:

- Gain an in-depth understanding of the commissioning process
- Work alongside Leeds to support them to understand how strengths-based working might be applied to an outreach setting
- Work alongside Leeds to support them to embed a strengths-based approach in the commissioning process and in the new service.

What steps were undertaken?

Discussions took place with Homeless Link, Expert Link and Inspire Chilli to explore the nature of strengths-based practice and the commissioning process. Documents shared around how we commission and contract manage and to seek the views on what this looked like from a strengths-based perspective. The outcome of these meetings was that there were a lot of opportunities and challenges highlighted including:

Opportunities

- Support around consultation process – particular with other services around the country to benchmark and ideas on seeking views of service users and ways to progress this
- Sense checking the language used in the procurement documentation – particularly the specification – and looking to ensure that this was more strengths based.
- Shaping outcomes / outputs around strengths-based practice
- Thinking through how the approach could be incorporated into the specification to offer more flexibility to the service provider
- Looking to remove requirements that can stand in the way of positive working

Challenges

- Time constraints of the team within the commissioning timeframe. Difficulty to reframe documents or push back against unhelpful processes
- Budget
- Level of detail required within specifications and does this lead to reduced flexibility

A key part of the process was getting agreement for Homeless Link to be part of the commissioning project team effectively acting as an outside critical friend. They were part of the whole journey and provide key feedback throughout to help us shape the process throughout the consultation, options appraisal, specification and performance framework development, procurement and finally mobilisation of the new contract.

Was anyone else involved? E.g. partner agencies

Leeds City Council, Homeless Link, Expert Link, Inspire Chilli

What have the outcomes been?

- A greater understanding and cross fertilisation of ideas
- A strengths-based framework was produced to outline in detail how to apply the approach to outreach work using the structure of our Quality Management Framework (QMF).
- Commissioning process and documentation were influenced and changed to be more strengths based
- Agreement to have Homeless Link as a part of the commissioning project team to work alongside us through the commissioning process. We had never had an external agency work with us in this way – effectively acting as a critical friend. This enabled us to tweak and amend as we went through the commissioning process but also gave Homeless Link an invaluable insight into the commissioning process and the parameters and governance structures that we have to work within.
- Training session for the outreach staff on strengths-based practice as part of the mobilisation of the new contract
- Input and participation with sharing learning and practice at a number of webinar events
- Dissemination of strengths-based toolkit and documentation to wider commissioning colleagues
- Adaptation of the strengths-based toolkit framework document to apply to other services and dissemination across the homelessness sector

What have we learned about what works and the challenges? Leeds City Council

The real strength of this project was the partnership and openness in the exchange of ideas and ways of working. It was very insightful to work alongside Homeless Link, Expert Link and Inspire Chilli – to be able to explain and talk through our processes and ideas and constraints and to then be able to adjust and tweak things within those constraints based on the feedback from external partners. I think that all parties gained a lot from this process.

The most significant challenges were time and budgets. As a result of this we had to adapt and be realistic on what could be achieved – we could not totally change the commissioning process and we could not necessarily increase the budget for the procurement. However despite these challenges we worked well within the constraints and looked to change language, specification and performance framework. In addition the process was influenced through the consultation and bench marking that was carried out.

Key process now is to reflect on how this can be taken forward – it would be good if a commissioner toolkit could be added to the suite of strengths-based documents. In addition for us we need to look to learn from and replicate this process and improve upon it with future commissions that we have coming up.

What have we learned about what works and the challenges? Homeless Link

It was an incredible learning process to be included within the project team and gave great insight into the commissioning process. The partnership worked extremely well in terms of exchange of ideas. In addition, Homeless Link was able to use its network to connect Leeds to outreach services in other areas that could provide useful insight as well as using general expertise to advise on the outreach team. As mentioned this led to the development of a framework on strengths-based outreach which was then adapted and published as part of the toolkit as a general framework. Homeless Link was also able to provide input into the service specification and other documents based on expertise on strengths-based working.

The two biggest challenges a lack of previous in-depth knowledge of the commissioning process and time constraints.

A great deal was learnt during this partnership about the different stages of commissioning and overall the partnership was a success. In hindsight, there were opportunities to influence the process more that were not fully utilised. This might have included running a specific consultation session on strengths-based approaches and providing training at the outset to the commissioning team. These were discussed but due to delays caused by the pandemic Leeds had to undertake the process extremely quickly and this made it difficult to schedule in a separate consultation or staff training. In addition, Homeless Link had only limited time to dedicate to the partnership. However, this might have helped the project team to be better able to incorporate strengths-based working.

A recommendation for future work would be to ensure that there is an early opportunity to upskill the team with a thorough understanding of strengths-based work and to build this into the consultation process.

Final Thoughts

Overall this partnership was a great success and a great deal was learnt on both sides. In particular the development of the specific outreach framework and toolkit was key to developing a similar framework that can be used by other types of services. This was one of the main outputs from the Strengths-based Toolkit Project.

Related documents

- [Leeds Plan on a Page](#)
- [Leeds Quality Management Framework](#)
- [A framework for strengths-based working](#) developed initially for Leeds

What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

Homeless Link

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**Let's End Homelessness
Together**

