



**Exploring the use of assets
in practice:
The *Includem* gangs pilot**

BACKGROUND

Asset based approaches are currently prominent in thinking around the future development of public health policy and practice. The advantages that may be achieved through rebalancing effort towards assets, and away from deficit based approaches, have been outlined in a previous GCPH briefing paper^a. Although the theoretical underpinnings of these approaches are well established, the theory does not incorporate attention to the processes of translating that theory into practice. Indeed, grounding practice within the circumstances and lived-experiences of the people and communities who use services will be key to ensuring the successful translation of policy aspiration into new forms of public services. Asset based approaches are not a prescriptive set of operations that can be easily ‘rolled-out’ or ‘scaled-up’ but are forms of engagement and relationship building that enable strengths, capacities and abilities to be identified and developed for positive outcomes. Operationalising such approaches will require a shift in focus from the ‘what’ or content of interventions, to the ‘how’ of providing flexible, tailored support within relationships of care.

For asset based approaches to flourish the skill sets required for 21st century public health workers and allied professionals will be different from those required previously. Practitioners will be required to be more generalist, more empathetic, more aware of and responsive to the potential ways clients and communities can begin to author more healthful and successful lives for themselves, and more able to offer support toward these ambitions. This paper explores an existing innovative intervention – the *Includem* project – that offers an opportunity for reflection on what asset based practice might look like.

Includem

The *Includem* project is an existing intervention around a complex, multi-dimensional problem. Successive attempts to resolve the problem have failed. The project works with young people at risk of custodial sentences from involvement in gangs and other forms of anti-social behaviour. It works by recognising and working with sources of resilience at individual, network and wider community levels, therefore offering learning for asset based approaches in relation to:

- How the evolving relationship between client and worker is vital in the identification of assets and production of positive outcomes
- Developing a client-centred understanding of interventions
- Work concerning complex social problems in which existing approaches and interventions have low success rates
- Working in circumstances where the distinction between assets and risks is not clear cut but is embedded within the client’s particular circumstances
- Dealing with setbacks and making the working relationship resilient to disappointment
- How partnership working can lead to a reframing of how clients’ perspectives are understood by the agencies working with them, and furthermore, change the context of the client where services have become a barrier to progress as much as a support.

A key finding relating to how the *Includem* intervention works is through its recognition that assets and deficits are often ‘two sides of the same coin’; that the energy and ambitions that can lead an individual into trouble, risky behaviour and activities harmful to future life chances can, in other circumstances and opportunity structures, be the energies which underpin successful life strategies. A key learning point, from this intervention, for asset based approaches, is the dual means by which change is allowed to happen. Firstly at an individual level, the process of engagement allows the identification of previously unacknowledged strengths but secondly, and just as crucially, elements of the wider intervention in which the person-centred work sits, allows for a reconfiguring of structural circumstances so that strengths can be unleashed. This context is enabled by the location of the *Includem* intervention within the wider Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) in which multiple agencies and partners find common purpose around a problem with multiple causes.

The intervention

Includem is a voluntary organisation with an existing and successful programme of intensive one-to-one support for vulnerable young people. They exclusively target those who have exhausted the resources of other agencies, who live chaotic lives and for whom engagement and sustaining contact is difficult.

By providing a scaffold of support, driven by the ethos of maintaining close, trust-based relationships with young people, *Includem*'s approach is holistic, supporting change at a variety of levels: individual, family and wider network. This model of working has been demonstrated to reduce re-offending and promote desistanceⁱ. Although it is known that the model works with young people traditionally seen as difficult to engage, less is known about the processes and experiences of change, particularly in developments around young people's involvement in social networks that can sustain changes made at an individual level. This report explores some of the processes involved in supporting long-term change.

As part of the Scottish Government's wider commitment to respond to violence, knife crime and gangs, CIRV invited *Includem* to extend its model of working to young people identified through police intelligence as being on gang related pathways of offending, yet as a result of intervention had expressed a willingness to choose a different trajectory to adulthood. A package of preventative activity was provided through CIRV such as ‘call-ins’ to instil a sense of where current pathways were leading, and court visits, hearing testimonies from reformed gang members and the victims of gang violence (including parents of victims of reformed gang members themselves). The *Includem* model of ‘getting alongside’ young people to encourage and maintain desistance from crime was extended to those perceived as the ‘next generation’ of gang members and those who had expressed commitment to developing a new a way of life other than gang related activity.

This model has recently received high profile attention in the development of the Westminster Government's response to gang activity, implicated as a causal influence in the Summer 2011 riots in English citiesⁱⁱ.

The pilot extension of *Includem's* way of working described here had the following aim:

- To reduce offending of young people involved in gang behaviours, and the number of victims created, through delivery of intensive support and supervision at times of risk and supporting young people to (re)engage with services and opportunities which build skills and resilience for positive choices and lifestyles.

With the following specific objectives:

- Reduction of offending and reoffending behaviour
- Encouragement of young people to consider victim issues and the effects of anti-social behaviour
- Reduction in antisocial and negative peer association
- Improve young people's self esteem and sense of purpose
- Support and enablement of parents and carers to maintain young people safely in the community
- Supporting of access to CIRV and other interventions for education, employment or other structured activities
- Support reductions in alcohol and drug use that impact on behaviour.

In terms of outcomes, *Includem's* own internal monitoring and evaluation showed the pilot intervention to be successfulⁱⁱⁱ with all of the 23 young people going through the intervention demonstrating a reduction in the frequency and severity of offending behaviour. Ninety-three per cent of these young people demonstrated improvements with issues such as risk taking, keeping safe, consequential thinking, violence and anger management.

Researching process and form of engagement

The gangs pilot offered a number of opportunities for learning about how agencies and practitioners can respond to complex problems, not just with young people at risk of custodial sentences, but more broadly, individuals requiring intensive support to overcome problems that have multiple and ingrained causes. Using the *Includem* pilot as a model with a proven track record of success, but recognising the unique circumstances of the CIRV partnership, the research sought to qualitatively distil relational processes embedded within *Includem's* way of working with clients for wider learning.

There is already a substantial research literature shedding light on what the content of interventions with young people at risk of custodial sentence should be (what works) as well as evidence (including through the project's own monitoring processes) of *Includem's* role in producing successful outcomes. There was, however, a need to better describe the processes within the relationships that produce sustainable change (how it works).

The (re)emergence of asset based approaches in public health more generally has seen calls for empirically based guidance on how practitioners can energise assets at the level of both the individual and their social networks and communities. Further, knowledge is also required of how practitioners and interventions can help clients re-frame their understandings^{iv} to make best use of available assets.

To this end, we explored processes and strategies within the intervention that facilitated:

- A positive relationship between worker and young person so that work could take place.
- Reflection on decision-making and how it was encouraged as part of a reframing of the client's perspective on offending and available resources.
- The activation of influences and assets at a community and network level to assist the promotion of successful trajectories of non-offending.

 METHODS

To explore the importance of relationships in promoting and sustaining change we interviewed six young people at two time points as they went through the intervention. We also interviewed their *Includem* workers (three in total) to get their perspective on the nature of the relationship with each young person and how it was developing. In the young person interviews we asked them to reflect on their understanding and development on a range of resilience enhancing factors such as decision-making, consequential thinking, empathy, aspirations and relations with others. They were also asked to map their current social networks to explore the balance of protective factors and risk within their existing relationships.

FINDINGS

Disentangling assets from deficits – the asset of self-determination within the context of the client/worker relationship

The data pointed to the importance of slow beginnings in the development of the working relationship between young person and worker. Extended lead in times at the early stages of engagement would be crucial in establishing the trust required for identification of assets which relied upon an open, trusting relationship with workers. If a strict outcomes focus were maintained during the early stages of client/worker engagement, evidence of the project's failure would be easily found; it would be common for young people to miss appointments, to continue to be picked up by the police and to continue to engage in anti-social behaviour. However, a key interpersonal asset that was developing was the young person's sense of agency within the relationship. For the intervention to work, young people needed evidence that their mentors were different from other professionals that they may have had contact with in the past. These were relationships where the young person's expressions of agency or self-determination had often resulted in the withdrawal of the service or other censure. In describing their relationships with *Includem* workers, young people would often compare them favourably with teachers or social workers.

"If you've done something, say ended up in the jail, the Includem workers will help you right. The social workers just go on and nab at you. The Includem workers also tell you it is wrong but they help you stop doing it."

Consequently, young people were often able to identify differences in the *Includem* workers' manner of working, grounded in experiences of having 'tested' the limits of availability and support. The strategic role of allowing young people agency within *Includem's* way of working is described in Figure 1. 'In-flows' from both the worker and young person are crucial to its success. In the longer term, it will be the young person who will enact the new responses (display the agency) required for a more successful life. Previous engagements with professionals were reported to have led to a suppression rather than the adaptation of agency and self-efficacy required to sustain positive change. Through work to improve judgement and consequential thinking, the same sense of agency that had previously led to young people taking risks resulting in trouble, could be utilised to move young people into a self-reinforcing feedback loop.

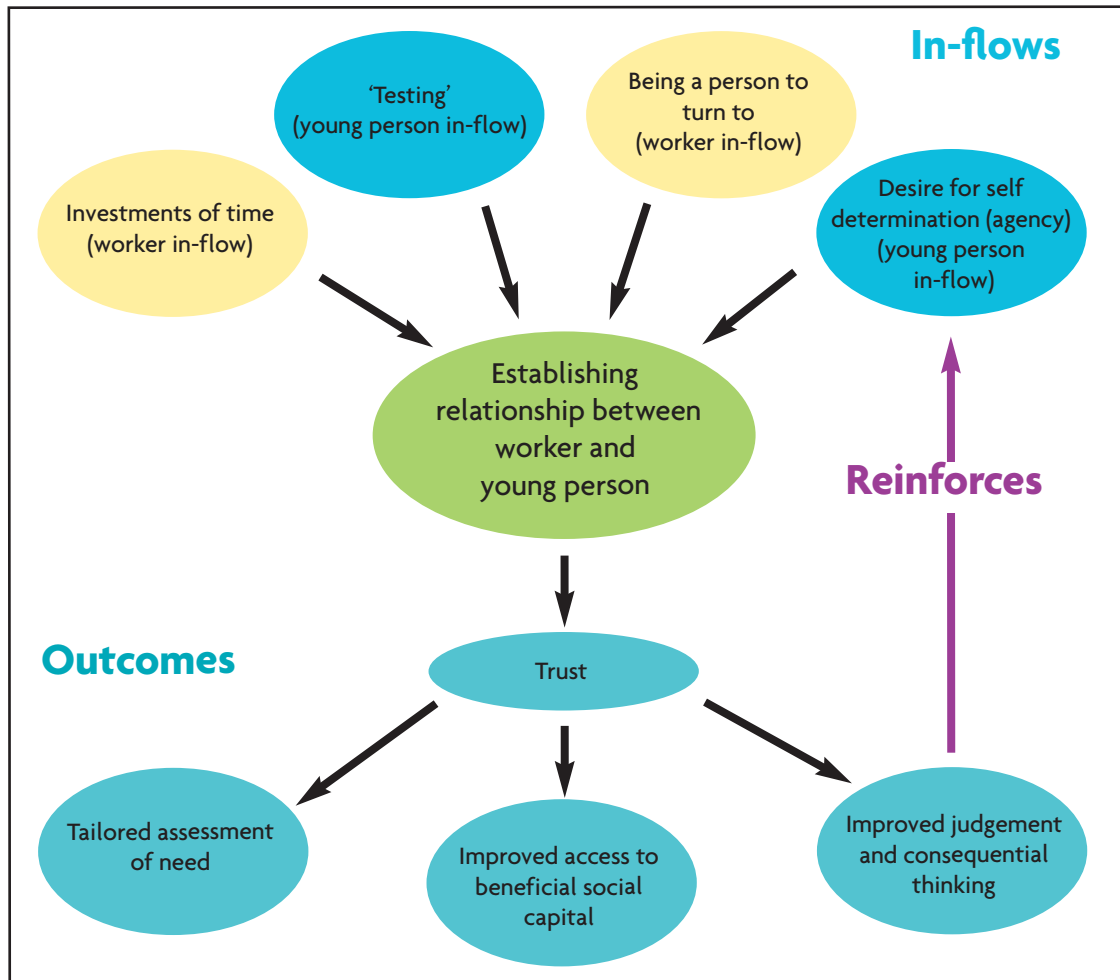
The revelations that came from trusting relationships also meant that in a more immediate sense, tailored support and referral could be made relevant to the issues facing young people. Further, asset mapping could begin to take place – a process for which trust around revelation and disclosure is essential.

It also meant the relationship could be called upon in circumstances where the use of other workers would involve a degree of jeopardy. In the example below, a young person had experienced a severe "whitey"^b after smoking cannabis.

"I was going to phone an ambulance but that would have made it worse... they would have got the police involved."

^b The young person's term for an episode of anxiety and nausea following cannabis use

Figure 1. Schematic description of processes described within relationships



Starting with the familiar – utilising existing relationships in the development of empathy

Once trust had become established, workers used the flows of information to support on-going work. Such opportunities included using real life events to promote the development of consequential thinking – a key outcome for the intervention. The strongest and most grounded variety of consequential thinking evidenced by the young people in interviews was in relation to empathetic thinking: a form of consequential thinking that involves reflection about the consequences of one’s own actions on others. It was therefore often siblings and family members who acted as a catalytic resource for young people in terms of their evolving consequential thinking.

“I am not getting into trouble anymore because my mum took not well in the last year ... I was always bringing the Polis to my door and that and she wasnae well. So, I’ve stopped it now, I didn’t want my ma getting all worried and that”

This was important as, in interviews, participants often displayed an unconvincing acceptance of the need to think consequentially in relation to their own lives (in particular, projective thinking around future labour-market roles were poorly formed), but the value of reflection about the effects of their own behaviour for significant others was more self-evident. In two cases, behaviour was moderated to protect younger siblings from seeing a life of offending as normal.

“I don’t get trouble when he’s around (younger brother) ... I don’t want him getting into trouble you know, because if he’s there then he’ll get into trouble as well ... I just don’t want him getting the jail when he’s older.”

A limitation of empathy based desistance, perhaps a factor of young people’s particular developmental stages, was that young people could exercise empathetic thinking in relation to violent crime, whereas property crime could be seen as victimless.

Social networks as assets: the paradox of gangs

Social networks are considered important assets in promoting a range of positive outcomes relating to health, wellbeing and employment^{v,vi}. However, as others have noted^{vii}, community assets such as social cohesion can have ‘downsides’ that harm rather than protect the health and wellbeing of certain community members. The proximity, or membership, of young people to youth gangs in communities involved in the intervention is an example of this overlapping of assets and risks. The distinction is further blurred by the fact that the label ‘gang’ is fluid and the young people in our research often contested the existence of certain gang groupings identified within police intelligence or saw them as having short life-spans rather than as pervading features of a particular area.

Figure 2 describes some of the positive and negative outcomes of social networks described using the terminology of the various forms of social capital. The table is an adaptation of Baum (2010)^{viii} which has been amended to be appropriate to characteristics of the *Includem* intervention and the asset/deficit landscape of the worker/client relationship.

Figure 2. Forms of social capital as assets/deficits in the *Includem* landscape

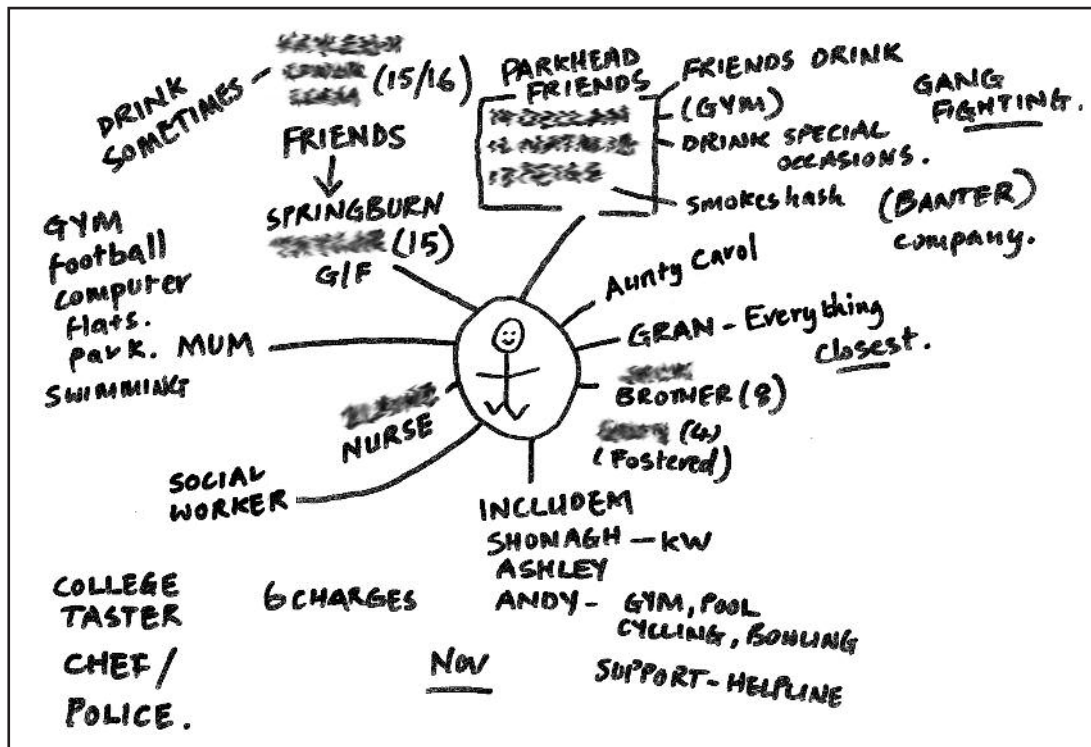
Type of social capital	Description	Ways in which it can promote health equity	Ways in which it can detract from health equity
Bonding	Tight relationships between people with similar values/ characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides support • Provides sense of identity • Formation of groups can facilitate action in protection of community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threatening to outsiders • Conflict within group unhealthy • Territorialism
Bridging	Looser relationships across different or diverse groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases access to information flows /activities • Important in job seeking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In short supply within youth gang subcultures and areas of high territoriality (absence becomes a deficit) • Requires emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills • Lack of job opportunities in area limits diversity of available information and opportunities
Linking	Relationships across power barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributes to overcoming structural economic inequalities • Benefits flow from more powerful to less 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When relationships with power structures (police) have become antagonistic • Ignores power differentials

Bonding social capital (Figure 2) is a useful asset for the development of identity and, as documented in the data collected from young people, was considered important for social and emotional support. In circumstances of severe parental hardships such as poverty or substance misuse (as featured in the backgrounds of some of the young people) the young person's access to beneficial 'bonding' links can be restricted^{ix} and this possible asset is thereby transformed into a deficit. However, more positively, children and young people are also active in the creation and maintenance of their own social networks^{x, xi}, and it is possible therefore to assist young people to successfully develop positive and supportive social network links. A problem encountered by *Includem* workers was where assets and deficits were found not only in the 'inherited' social links of family but in the networks created by young people too. By way of illustration, a worker spoke of how an older friend of one of the young people had a "very active involvement in violent offending" but recognised how the older friend was "a big support for him ... unfortunately, he's kind of there for him".

Similarly, young people themselves, whilst often recognising the need to reconfigure the balance of the time they spent between positive and negative network links, saw these links as overlain within rather than between individuals. One young person with a diverse social network that involved two geographically distinct networks of friendships (offending and gang fighting took place within his friendships in the East of the city, his North city network did not engage in gang activity) found breaking links with his friends in the East difficult:

"My social worker tries to get me away from them and she got me away from (name) but I'll always stop in the street and say 'hiya'. She's been my pal for years so I can trust her."

Figure 3. A diverse social network



NB some names obscured for anonymity

An initial ambition of the intervention was to work not only with individuals but with peer groups who collectively engaged in offending behaviour. However, this was found to be too difficult to achieve operationally and the focus remained on enabling individuals to successfully navigate and manage the balance of assets and risk within their peer networks. By working with individual members of offending networks (or 'gangs') it was hoped the intervention would have an aggregate effect of transforming group behaviour, or at least see the risky network dissipate as individual members began to make more positive choices. However, given the emotional support of friendships in local areas, this would often see a potential loss of assets as well as increased risk. To account for this, the strategy needed to focus on encouraging growth to more successful futures through the development of aspirations and the harnessing of community and educational resources.

This focus on bridging and linking social capital represents a key area in which the intervention addressed the balance of assets and deficits within the lives of young people. This was often despite barriers to accessing services in the local area, such as those stemming from territorial mindsets which restricted safe freedom of movement. In some cases these could be overcome by widening the young person's social network. Territoriality was to a large degree kept 'real' through involvement in gang activity. Moving the focus away from gangs could result in a diminished sense of restriction on where young people could and could not go. In one key interview, the idea that the intervention allowed growth and development away from gang activity through extending network links was evident:

- Interviewer: *What happened?*
 YP: *Nothing, I just thought this is weans stuff and stopped*
 Interviewer: *Do you think it is quite immature?*
 YP: *Aye, cos I need to walk through Royston to get to my football team*
 Interviewer: *And is that who you fight with?*
 YP: *Aye*
 Interviewer: *What about your pals those are in the gang then?*
 YP: *They've stopped as well, they're all working and that.*

Crucially, a sense of agency and of personal decision-making is prominent in the young person's account of moving-on from gang activity. However, so too is a sense of the right circumstances being put in place to allow somewhere else for the young person to grow toward. Helping young people identify, access and use these growth points is crucial to the manner in which the intervention works without detracting from a young person's sense of self-determination – an asset that will be crucial to sustaining more positive trajectories post-intervention.

Partnership as a strategy for overcoming contextual circumstances beyond the individual

Challenges for individual level, asset based approaches are the barriers to progress that stem from the structured deficits within communities or even within wider society. Such environmental deficits, such societal prejudice or the lack of employment opportunities, can hold people back from establishing successful lives, regardless of changes at the individual level. These deficits are, by definition, beyond individual control. In the lives of the young people in the study, these included not only the risks posed by high levels of gang activity but also issues such as weakened local labour markets.

A key environmental aspect relevant to this study stemmed from established service responses to the construction of the gang problem, and in particular law and order reactions to high rates of anti-social behaviour and gang activity. These responses added an additional layer of risk for young people whose communities already featured significant barriers to life-chances from poverty, violence and tight labour-markets. Prior to the intervention, young people tended to feel unfairly hassled or monitored by the police, often being under suspicion for any crimes in the area. During the intervention, young people would recognise a détente in relations with the police that provided them with a safe space in which to practice new responses and decision-making strategies.

“The police got on to them and told them what we were doing and ever since I’ve been with them the police have never said anything to us. Never took us in or anything. They talk to us, aye, but they don’t come out and search us or anything.”

This progress is as much down to the relationship between *Includem* and the police within the partnership as to the work taking place at an individual level. These two components reinforce each other; giving young people the practices and dispositions to achieve desistance but also removing some of the high stakes consequences of failure to do so.

Contextual limitations to progress

Other contextual factors would be harder to change either through individual intervention or the partnership. Of note here were the limited range of opportunities that continued to be offered to young people in more deprived parts of the city. This is both in terms of diversionary activities before entering the labour market and job opportunities when reaching full adulthood.

In the case of diversionary activities, a worker summarised the difficulty in sustaining activities that offer long term protection from street based activity:

“We didn’t link him to anything definite, we’ve not really done that with a lot of young people to be honest. We’ve not found anything that is sustainable, that doesn’t cost anything, that is nearby, that they like doing, that is available. We would push it if they expressed an interest in something but more often than not they can’t afford it when we stop paying for it.”

A similar lack of awareness of opportunity characterised thoughts towards their futures and the jobs market.

“In terms of the jail or secure, he doesn’t want it but he hasn’t really taken it on board in relation to the kind of job he wants, these are not features of his thinking or of his peer group.”

For younger participants it is perhaps understandable if such long term thinking around jobs had not yet developed but even for older participants, a failure to identify an appropriate employment track could reflect the nature of the local employment market. One older participant (aged 17) recognised the need to establish a career as part of a pathway out of offending but could not be more specific than ‘the building trade’; another was currently fluctuating between the realistic (shop work) and unrealistic (professional footballer). Pathways into employment are likely to be bumpy, with false starts and cycling between employment and unemployment being part of the experience. This underlines the need for on-going support through early adulthood and is a limitation of a short term, albeit intensive intervention.

SUMMARY OF LEARNING

- The project adopts a strong assets focus, concentrating on what resources young people have as well as helping young people use their autonomy in positive ways. The *Includem* model has much to offer the developing asset based approach to health and social problems in areas where the structural causes of unequal outcomes are well documented and recognised. Their approach does not ignore structural circumstances but engages with existing interpersonal resources and encourages the development of new ones.
- It illustrates how partnerships can be configured to establish common purpose around a complex problem. The success of the partnership in this instance was through a transformation of relationships young people had with existing services (the police) by augmenting the service perspective on the problem – adding a social work perspective on how to tackle gang issues alongside the existing law and order approach.
- This had the advantage of transforming a key environmental factor – a high profile community response to anti-social behaviour which young people reportedly felt increased the risks of gaining a criminal conviction.
- It highlights processes in the client/worker relationship and what the development of trust enables. In this case it allowed fuller disclosure around a client's issues and a sense of support through the difficult process of change.
- To this end, the workers could be seen as compensatory social capital for the young people, both as 'bonding social capital' in offering support for change and 'linking' social capital that provided some of the avenues of change.
- Processes in the establishment of trust in worker/client relationships inevitably take time, particularly when clients are hard to engage. However, the trust developed was essential to promoting successful outcomes, and time and resource costs should be understood as preventative investments to avoid future 'failure demand'.
- Despite the success of the project, the risks in young people's lives were multiple and stemmed as much from the labour market, economic circumstances and a lack of community resources as from a local problem with gangs.
- That some young people substituted their offending behaviour from violent crime to property crime further highlights the limitations in seeing youth offending through the lens of the 'gangs' problem.
- A limitation of the project was the lack of progress in engaging wider social networks (families and peers) as part of the intervention. In our data, intervention at the level of the peer group was evidenced through equipping young people to handle risky situations. However the areas young people lived in remained risky and thought must be given to providing a sustainable, broad and accessible range of activities for young people. Further thought should be given to developing ways to engage beyond the level of the individual. This may fall outwith the scope of *Includem's* work and we must recognise the role to be played by wider community regeneration agencies in providing safer, accessible and sustainable alternatives for young people.

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