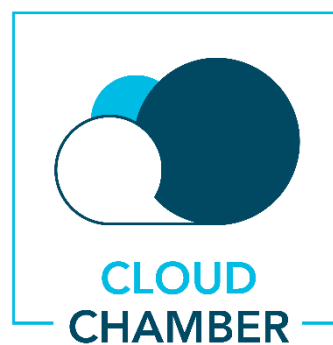


Power and Creativity: How
The THING and the Young
Women's Film at The
Warren Project illustrate
asset-based working



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1. Acknowledgements

This case study was prepared in collaboration with the wonderful staff and young people at The Warren Youth Project in Hull. We are so grateful for your time, effort, feedback, sharing and support in this research. You always found time for this even though you were so busy. Thank you.





2. About asset-based Working

Asset-based working looks different in different contexts, but the core principle is that everyone has strengths, gifts or 'assets' that should be a starting point for service delivery, community development and/or organisational development. Asset-based approaches are often contrasted with 'deficit-based' work which focuses on needs, problems and issues rather than strengths. This case study illustrates some examples of asset-based practice within The Warren Youth Project in Hull.

3. About The Warren Youth Project

Based in Hull, The Warren Youth Project (known as The Warren) provides vital support service to young people. It offers free support, guidance, training, education, counselling, employability skills/training and creative expression activities and services to young people aged 14-25 years (this extends to 29 years in the case of employability support).

The Warren values its relationships with young people and views young people as incredibly resourceful. The Warren know that, with support, young people can be trusted to know best about their own lives.

-  *"The ethos of The Warren is using young people's assets to become their best possible self, turning hurdles into assets" (staff).*
-  *"We've always worked that way, we're completely youth led" (staff).*
-  *"It's all in the relationship. If they have confidence in you, they realise they've got so much talent, they're creative and have good ideas. You end up rolling with their good feeling" (staff).*
-  *"The Warren, as a youth centre, meets our needs. Whatever is going on is what we've wanted" (young person).*

This case study highlights how The Warren has embedded asset-based working. We begin by describing its youth parliament, called The THING. We then go on explain how, through The THING, young people are empowered to make decisions and have an influence over their worlds. This is illustrated through the Young Women's Film, which, through The THING, young people decided to make to highlight the impact of Covid-19 on young women during 2020. It shows how there is strong listening between leadership and young people, with a democratic approach to decision making.

4. About The THING

The THING is The Warren's Youth Parliament. The trustees of The Warren gave away all their operational decision-making power so that all decisions about what goes on in projects are made by young people. This creates an environment where staff and young people come to The THING meetings and discuss ideas and opportunities and then only young people vote on them. So, if a staff member wants to go ahead and develop a project, they need to take their idea to The THING. Young people then discuss it, contribute further ideas and finally they vote on it. Voting needs to be quorate to make decisions, with four young people at its minimum.

The THING is built on the principles of valuing relationships and the importance of trust. The aspiration is for there to be a virtuous circle where young people have a voice, feel listened to and so listen to others. Staff are always on hand to support and encourage power-sharing, which contributes to feelings of respect. The staff then collaborate with young people to implement ideas that have been voted on, which further increase respect and belief in the process and each other. Young people are therefore empowered to bring ideas forward and shape their organisation.



5. The journey – how The THING has evolved

The THING has been a central part of The Warren for thirty years. It changes and responds to the different needs of the organisation. However, there is a consistent and clear Empowerment Policy which all people commit to as part of their involvement with The Warren. This is sometimes amended to stay current. While the Empowerment Policy remains constant, the frequency of meetings changes - this is often guided by what The Warren needs at the time.

The formula of meetings remains consistent. For example:

- icebreakers; so, everyone gets to speak,
- ground rules; so, the meetings stay focused and respectful,

- choosing of the chair and minute taker; so everyone has a go and no one dominates,
- agenda items: recap, new items and voting; so issues and ideas are given enough 'airtime'.

Anyone can take part in The THING, it's up to them if they want to be there and to what extent they want to participate. Every young person gets a vote. Staff do not get to vote.

🗨️ *"They've stuck it out, they still kept in going and they're learning that there are different ways of coming at something" (staff).*

The ground rules during an online The THING session:

- Mute your mic when not speaking.
- Use the raise hand feature to inform the chair you want to speak.
- Encourage meaningful debate.
- Challenge statements not people.
- If you're not sure if something is a slur, assume it is.

When The THING is scheduled, it is the only activity taking place at The Warren. A lack of alternative activities frees up time for people to come and join in. Whoever's in the building is welcome. For newcomers to the project, this shows them they are part of something bigger and that their voice is important. All the minutes from previous meetings are kept in the Snack Bar so everyone can see them. Food is served at the end of The Thing, so taking part and being there has additional social benefits, again putting young people at the heart of the project.

🗨️ *"The THING tells us that The Warren trust young people to make a decision in our best interests" (young person).*

🗨️ *"There's a big diary with all minutes in it, including from staff meetings in the snack bar so everyone can see what's been happening. There's a lot going on!" (staff).*

Some examples of how The THING works:

Working with External Agencies. The Thing will discuss and vote on The Warren's strategies for working with all external agencies and will promote The Warren philosophy in terms of not colluding with any attempt to undermine the independence and autonomy of young people.

Funding bids. Where fundraising bids are made for new projects/services, the project/service rationale has to be approved by The Thing. Funding bids for existing projects should be reviewed by The Thing if circumstances change.

New posts. If bids for new projects/services are successful, all new staff are interviewed, selected and appointed by a panel of young people. Where the applicant is an existing member of staff, the panel will be selected from young people who are not known to the internal applicant. That panel of young people receive training in how to interview; review all applications; choose the applicants for interview; and decide on the successful candidate. The Thing is informed of any likely changes required in Warren's policies if the

bid for post is successful (e.g., to reflect any new staff member's needs in terms of accessibility).

It's not a seamless journey of decision-making... sometimes young people, staff and management aren't aligned on decisions and ideas. However, staff's commitment to The THING and the Empowerment Policy means they have to trust in the decisions and carry out actions when they are agreed. The Young Women's film is an example of this. This is explored in more detail in the following section.

Staff notice the influence of socio-political climate on The THING... young people enjoyed something called 'Drop the Bomb' which gave them the chance to debate bigger issues that affected them as young people and took place at the end of The Thing. For example: Stop and Search and school leaving age. This feature has dwindled, with young people feeling less power to influence policy, though more recently they've voted to reinstate this, because they really enjoy sharing ideas and debating with each other.

Ringfenced budgets and funding constraints means young people are making different decisions in today's climate... young people have less decision-making power on some project designs, as there is less unrestricted funding for activities. However, they are involved in shaping projects at proposal stage and once projects are up and running. If there is unrestricted funding, then staff take project ideas to the THING and young people decide on it and put the ideas out to members.

Q *"They know there is a commitment from staff to deliver the outcomes young people want" (staff).*

How The Warren defines empowerment: (From The Warren's Empowerment Policy)

"At The Warren, empowerment is about facilitating each young person to have control over their own lives by being given the opportunity to acquire the skills, knowledge and information so that they can make their own informed choices. We aim in all our activities and services to create processes to maximise the involvement of young people, and we believe that they should make the decisions about how the agency works and develops. We recognise the inequalities of power and resources in our society that result in social ills such as unemployment, poverty, homelessness, sexist and racist oppression etc. and will actively support those young people who wish to address and campaign against those inequalities. We understand that our attempt to develop empowerment is an ongoing, often contradictory, and, at times, conflictual process; but whatever the struggles, our core values of supporting young people to have control over their lives, informs all debates and actions. We recognise that empowerment should also define The Warren as a community of friendships and support networks where young people can find their voice through accessing active support."



The THING adapting during Covid-19

Currently with COVID restrictions, The THING is operating online and has been meeting every two weeks instead of weekly.

Whilst there have always been enough young people present to make decision making quorate, numbers of participants have dwindled at times especially in early lockdowns. In response, some of the staff tried to boost numbers of young people attending by encouraging new young people to go and reminding others to join in too.

The intention is that The THING will go back to face-to-face meetings soon as this allows for more interaction and sharing of ideas

6. About the Young Women's Film

The Young Women's Film is a professionally produced documentary, involving some of the young women who are service users of The Warren. It was made in September 2020 and depicts the story of lockdown from young women's experiences. It is their chance to tell their story about the impact of COVID on their everyday experiences.



During the first lockdown, it was these and other young women in a similar predicament that caught The Warren's 'Can Do' team's attention¹. Being a predominantly female team themselves, the issues resonated deeply. Of the people calling in for food packages and support, 85% were young women, with a lot of these being young mums. These women and their children

were acutely impacted by the lockdown and job losses. The 'Can Do' team felt that as well as helping, it was essential to tell their story and raise awareness of the gender skew of the pandemic. The young women agreed and were happy to work together to share the impact of this issue.

“Through lockdown and food parcels, care parcels and period poverty, we gathered a lot of data. Every meeting we talked about the gender issues of lockdown, young women who are parents” (staff).

Being a story that is about young women, and being a team of women working with them, the staff and young women involved believed that this documentary needed to be produced and directed by an all-female team. The staff approached someone who was a professional filmmaker and was happy to do this at a reduced cost, but she hadn't worked with The Warren before.

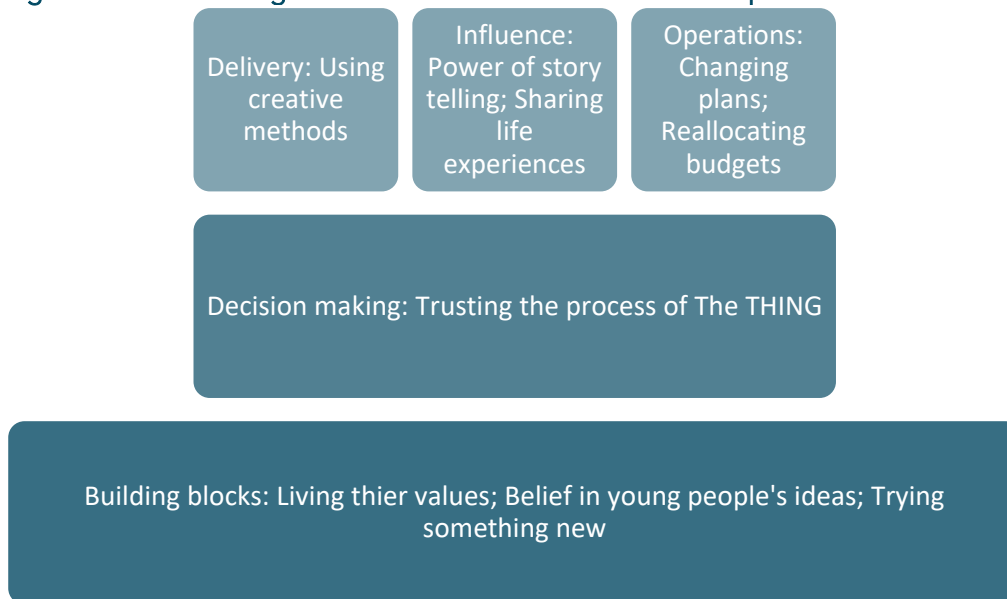
There was another idea at The Warren to make a documentary at around the same time about capturing the impact on all the young users of The Warren, regardless of gender. A male filmmaker who regularly works with The Warren was 'waiting in the wings' to tell that story. There was not enough funding to make both films, and the staff attached to the female film wanted it to be made by all-female creatives. This resulted in some open and difficult conversations between management and staff, modelling their commitment to listening to and respecting each other. They held equal power, with no one dominating the conversations when their ideas were not aligned. It meant that The Warren team experienced new learning and The THING's role remained the central decision-making forum.

¹ The Can Do team supports 16-25 year olds by providing a programme of fun, informal, creative and unique learning opportunities which helps to build relationships, confidence, and self-esteem. They encourage young people to be at the heart of the decision-making process at The Warren. They support young people to work together to better understand issues that might affect them personally and socially. They also support young people to deliver campaigns and events

The Young Women's Film is an example of how The Warren choose to live their values, their belief in young people's empowerment and The THING'S decision-making authority. The team were able to change plans, re-allocate budgets and try something new. This is an example of how staff and young people worked with issues and ideas that rose organically. Furthermore, it shows the power of storytelling and how sharing lived experiences during Covid-19 empowers young people and provides space for them to tell their stories.



Figure: How the Young Women's Film illustrates asset-based practice



7. The practice: the building blocks of asset-based working

a. The THING: Deciding what does and doesn't happen across the organisation.

Young people are responsible for exploring, understanding and choosing whether ideas are right for them. This means they need to show up for The THING and participate to some degree. This can be listening in, running meetings or voting. People take turns to chair and take minutes. This flexibility also benefits the dynamics among young people, as it stops cliques from forming and people dominating the meetings.

🗨️ *"It's the one time everyone gets seen, heard a and valued in formal ways" (staff).*

🗨️ *"It's really inclusive, accepting anyone or any idea" (young person).*

b. Young people are always supported to find their voice

During The THING, young people are supported by staff who join the meetings. The staff encourage young people's leadership, guide participation, invite decorum and this builds confidence. It means that those young people who have never previously attended, feel safe, comfortable to contribute and valued in their ideas. It means that whatever they bring into the meeting has an opportunity to be transformed into a positive, whether it's a story about harsh lockdown (Young Women's Film) or transgender representation.

🗨️ *"Today was my first time. Everyone was so welcoming that I feel more confident to participate in other meetings. I can't believe I've just agreed to talk to the police about trans-views" (young person).*

- “We find sticking to a formula works well, and we work out when it needs to change, it’s usually when the young people aren’t engaging, that’s telling us something” (staff).

Young people recognise that taking part in The THING is important. It shows them they are important to the organisation and builds confidence in their voice.

- “Some of these young people haven’t been listened to [before]. They come here and see that we’re listening, and it gives them so much confidence, they start to realise they’ve got a voice and others may listen too” (staff).

Once they’ve found their voice, some young people might forget to give others a voice too. Staff are on-hand to facilitate and encourage constructive dialogue between all young people, keeping things on track and changing tack, if things aren’t working. That’s not to say it always goes to plan, but if it doesn’t there’s enough trust between everyone, including between staff, to go with any changes.

- “Staff are always around in case young people exercise power over each other. It’s not easy but if you believe in participation you commit to making it work” (staff).
- “Things can get heated; things can fall flat. There is always a skill base in the room, so the staff team know to trust each other. We all stay curious with what’s going on” (staff).
- “Staff have to role model in the meetings, they are always demonstrating a skill and not taking over” (staff).

c. The organisation encourages young people to use creativity to tell their stories

The whole process of the Young Women’s Film reflects the core belief in creativity. To all involved this story needed to be produced, directed and supported by women. Young women were supported to tell their story and The Warren ensured it was told accurately and respectfully. This was essential and The Warren team wouldn’t accept anything less. The story of their hardship was turned into an asset. It will be shared widely and the young women seem to have grown a little more confident as a result. Since being involved, some have talked on the local news to raise awareness.

- “I never thought I’d do (the news), but after saying yes to the film, I get into lots more things at The Warren, I’m joining everything” (young person).
- “It was really hard, but we knew the film had to be made by women and be about woman only. We just knew. And so, there were a lot of chats and it happened. But it’s nerve wracking” (staff).

The young women who took part in the film are also part of The Warren’s young women’s group. Some also started to join in different activities at The Warren, including The THING.

This shows how they are benefitting from the support and relationships with The Warren team as well as with each other.

d. Staff respect young people and each other to model values and trusting relationships

In addition to signing up to The Warren's empowerment policy, staff try to practice empowering behaviour with each other, as well as young people. Sometimes, this means they have to let go of 'best laid plans' and egos and pivot to something that others feel is more important to execute than their initial ideas or plans. This can range from the format for Christmas parties, new staff recruitment or creative outputs like film making. Staff admit that sometimes this can feel risky and they can feel vulnerable; but acknowledge they have made a commitment to work in a certain way.

“They [staff] trust us, the young people to make decisions in our best interests” (young person).

“We had a candidate that we thought would work best, but the young people had someone else in mind. Their relationship with that person is so important, so we had to trust them” (staff).

8. Consideration points for other organisations based on The THING and the Young Women's Film experience

- How do you let young people know your organisation trusts them?
- How do you use creativity to help young people find their voices including those who would say *'they're not creative'*?
- How could your organisation change its power sharing model?
- What would happen in your organisation if young people wanted to follow a different course of action to management? What would the implications of this be for the engagement and empowerment of young people?
- How are things managed when they don't go to plan?

9. Asset-based Framework highlight summary

The table below maps The THING and the Young Women’s Film on to the framework for asset-based working (developed by Renaisi as part of the Youth Fund Evaluation for Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2019²). This case study will highlight that the building blocks of asset-based working do not fall neatly within the framework but, rather, cut across it. Through two initiatives, The Warren are demonstrating all aspects of the framework.

	How The Warren put asset-based principles into practice identified through research	Asset-based working framework blocks			
		Decision making	Delivery	Operations	Influence
Young people	✓ ...decide what does and doesn't happen across the organisation, young people are given responsibility	■	■	■	■
	✓ ...join the meetings in ways that work for them, lead, participate or observe				
	✓ ... young people are always supported to have a go and use their assets to flourish				
	✓ ...use creativity to tell important stories, raise awareness outside the organisation	■	■	■	■
Staff	✓ ...are respectful of each other and young people. They are equal in every way, including power. They have an empowerment policy in place	■	■	■	■
	✓ ...create a non-judgemental environment so everyone can be themselves				
	✓ ...prioritise relationships with young people, valuing everything they bring as an asset	■	■	■	■
	✓ ...make things happen, building deep trust				
	✓ ...model asset-based working by working with their strengths and trying sharing their vulnerability				

² Renaisi as part of the Youth Fund Evaluation for Paul Hamlyn, 2019