

## Stoke-on-Trent Community of Practice Guide

How coffee, cake and conversation can promote preferred futures with positive practice



# Contents

Foreword.....	3
Author's Introduction .....	5
Best hopes for the guide .....	6
Description, development and definitions of communities in Stoke-on-Trent and beyond .....	7
Why develop these communities? .....	11
What is a 'facilchair'?.....	12
Establishing a core group.....	14
What's a Community of Practice without the voice of lived experience? .....	14
Community of Practice Legacy.....	16
Case Study .....	17
Supporting a national initiative .....	17
International Community Interest.....	17
@SoTCoP Next Steps .....	18
Community of Practice Step by Step .....	19
First Steps: Establishing your Communities .....	19
Next Steps: Hosting the Community Conversation .....	20
Next Steps: Subsequent Community sessions.....	20
Maintaining a Community .....	21
Sharing Good Practice.....	21
@SoTCoP aide memoire and quick reference guide .....	22
Resources.....	23

“The things I found useful whilst attending the CoP must be the safe environment and opportunity to discuss ongoing concerns and issues that we identify as workers. It was useful to collaborate with other professionals and having the Expert Citizens at each CoP was both interesting and insightful to hear their experiences. There was always something new to learn and to share. My attendance at the CoP enhanced my experience and ways of working; it raised my knowledge base and enabled me to reflect more on my practice and on others practice.”

— Social Worker: Adult Services

# Foreword

## Making complexity a piece of everyone's cake

All formal meetings have two agendas. First, there's the one that's written down and circulated in advance. This concerns itself with the governance of the meeting, observance of the terms of reference, the timing and ownership of the substantive items, and the purpose of their inclusion. Items are framed as being for information, discussion, or decision. All very reasonable.

Second, there is the one that's not written down. It exists in the minds of the attendees or even the non-attendees. This agenda may be much longer. It is a composite of the vested interests, or perhaps vested disinterests, of all those summoned to be present.

Often, the etiquette of formal meetings makes direct discussion of the unwritten agenda taboo. Instead, participants engage in an intellectual foxtrot of oblique subtexts. A skilled Chair may orchestrate this dance between the seen and unseen agendas to intercept any telling sideways glances that risk unclocking any obscured connotations. Failure in this task is heralded by a descending hush that's only disturbed by the unvoiced sound of pennies dropping.

If unlucky, this pause marks a silent bridge to an impulsive tempo change. The Chair may clamour to regain the controlled foxtrot as participants begin to flirt with the potentially chaotic freestyle of disco or, worse, jazz. Such a meeting may be considered a success, at some level, if the written agenda is completed and everyone emerges unslighted having defended their vested interest invisibly with their working relationships intact.

Of course, that's all something of a hyperbole. Although, my guess is that we've all been to such a meeting. My main point is that formal meetings are often bad at problem solving. Notoriously so. At their worst, formal meetings avoid solving problems, make them worse, or even create the conditions of their birth. My aim here is to distinguish a meeting from a Community of Practice.

From the outside, even a well-managed Community of Practice may look like a meeting. However, it is crucial that they are not regarded or managed as just another meeting. Instead, the emphasis is on "community". A group of people with a shared interest in identifying, defining, and solving a problem.

At the heart of this approach is empathising with the constraints faced by colleagues and navigating a path to shared solutions, learning, and understanding. Therefore, a Community of Practice is interested in the application of lived experience and expertise to a problem.



In that regard, the system conditions and environment of the problem are mere context rather than defined entrenched positions to be defended by professional or organisational vested interests. A Community of Practice focuses on identifying and moving towards a shared future, where the problem is better understood, mitigated, or even resolved to mutual benefit. This approach requires a safe space and an honest open discussion of the constraints faced. This might feel uncomfortable. Movement towards solutions is achieved incrementally.

Matters outside of the control of the community may be highlighted and reported externally. However, they do not prevent the community from addressing the key question:

Given the resources available and system constraints, what can I do through my practice – with other like-minded people – to make this situation more efficient and more effective for our customers and colleagues?

In my lived experience, most formalised meetings are about the establishment of border controls, maintenance of boundaries, and the audit trail of accountability. I'm not knocking that; good governance is essential in organisations.

But, a Community of Practice is different. It is about colleagues, often from across diverse disciplines, better understanding their mutual interests through open dialogue around a specific problem. By understanding the constraints that we all face in the system, we're better placed to empathise and support each other towards a preferred future where our colleagues and customers enjoy a better outcome.

That often means dispensing with the formality and control of the foxtrot to encourage some freestyle disco or jazz. It means leaving the formal agenda at the door and appreciating that which is too often hidden.

We hope that through this guide, you can avoid creating just another meeting. Instead, you can aim to release the power of a community of likeminded people who are, like you, striving for practical and beautiful solutions to complex problems.

The Author, Shannon L. Alder said, "beauty is not who you are on the outside, it is the wisdom and time you gave away to save another struggling soul like you."

Our experience is that hot tea and a slice of cake helps to keep things informal, energised, and solution focused. In that way, a good community of practice makes dealing with complexity a piece of cake.

## Andy Meakin

VOICES Director



## Author's Introduction

This guide is written from my perspective as the most recent facilitator of the Community of Practice administered by VOICES in Stoke-on-Trent. My role in the guide is the storyteller and describer of the work done by VOICES, Expert Citizens CIC and their community members. The core team in the production of this guide are Lee Dale, Steve Freeman, Andrew Meakin, Bruno Ornelas, Sharon Sharman and members of the Community of Practice. No team....No output.

All people taking part in communities are essential to their success and influencing systems change. Their contributions to this guide cannot be overstated.

The terms community and communities are used throughout the document to represent communities of practice. Where reference is made specifically to the Stoke-on-Trent Community the Twitter username @SoTCoP is used.

My time as facilitator has been a confirmation of all the things I hoped for when beginning my work as a volunteer in a night shelter in Stoke-on-Trent in the mid 1970s. Environmental conditions were below today's expected standards and yet they had a positive impact. The team had a humane, positive approach which could be worthy of an Insight Award<sup>1</sup> in present day. During my time as chair of @SoTCoP, I have seen optimism borne of experience and reframed pessimism. I've been lucky to witness ideas develop into life changing practice which is now recorded and embedded<sup>2</sup>. Silos have been deconstructed by their inhabitants and best practice not only shared but adopted.

The @StokeCoP model has been shared, shaped and adopted internationally.

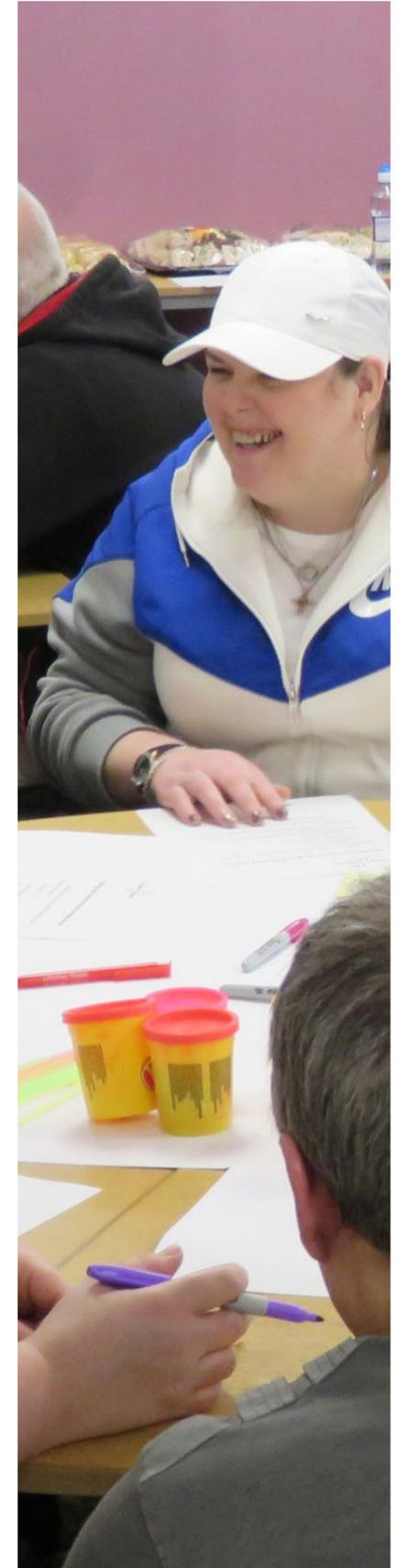
What more could anyone want in a lifetime let alone a career?

## Steve Freeman

Solution Focused Practitioner

"The CoP makes an issue and it's solution a shared responsibility across the city and provides a platform for coproduction in the solution."

— Housing Manager, Stoke-on-Trent



<sup>1</sup> See [www.expertcitizens.org.uk](http://www.expertcitizens.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> One such example is the genuine and unconditional inclusion of colleagues with lived experience, enabling organisations to see the true value of insight that can be gained and how we can learn by looking through a different lens. In turn, one Expert Citizen member stated, "I always thought they (frontline workers) didn't want to help me or that they didn't care; now, though, I can see and understand their frustrations and constraints".

## Best hopes for the guide

This guide aims to provide a guide to hosting communities as developed in Stoke-on-Trent by Steve Freeman, VOICES, Expert Citizens and partner agencies.

- To aid current and potential facilitators, chairs, participants and guests to get the most from their communities
- To support best practice in establishing, running, maintaining and ending communities with positive outcomes
- To help others avoid inherent difficulties and unnecessary complexities in hosting communities
- To provide links to background material on communities

The guide should be made available to all people with an interest in communities of practice (communities). Following the review of a series of communities in Stoke-on-Trent and the adoption of the model by other organisations the VOICES and Expert Citizens teams decided to produce a guide to support others and document the development of the “Stoke Communities of Practice” model.

The guide is aimed at a broad and inclusive readership. Key readers are expected to include anyone interested in an inclusive and competence-based community model, anyone wishing to establish a community, potential members seeking to better understand communities, those wishing to commission and develop communities. We believe that the guide has a parallel benefit in giving an example of ways in which people with lived experience are (and should be) involved in all stages of systems change as part of an inclusive team.

“The respect for acquired expertise, and the safety of the space to share that, gave the sector the Care Act Toolkit - a resource I have had cause to use a few times. Expertly chaired and facilitated, I saw professionals and experts across all levels of seniority, and across a range of disciplines come together to make change happen at a human level. The acknowledgement that systems are nothing but groups of people who can be brought together and encouraged to start and continue a dialogue is something that has never left me.”

— Partnership Manager, National Homelessness Charity



## Description, development and definitions of communities in Stoke-on-Trent and beyond

Steve Freeman has a background in working in health, social care and community settings dating back to 1994 as a registered nurse and for far longer as a volunteer and observer of lived experience. He was introduced to the concepts of communities of practice and ‘hosted conversations’ by Carl Plant CEO of BitJam in Staffordshire. Their work with the development of a world-renowned Community of Solution Focused Practice in Staffordshire led to his invitation to chair the developing @SoTCoP. Stoke-on-Trent was one of the research centres for a project led by Kings College. This builds on the “Little Miracles” research project<sup>3</sup>. A legacy group, Phase One of @SoTCoP, was developed by key members Bruno Ornelas and Sarah Wilshaw. Phase two came with the introduction of a solution focused practitioner as chair/facilitator and the development of ideas from Steve Freeman’s partnership with Carl Plant and the strong foundations already established by Bruno, Sarah and colleagues.

For the purpose of this guide the term ‘community’ has broad application. The origins of communities of practice are based in people living in a discrete geographical area and with a common interest. @SoTCoP has focused on the health and social needs of people in the Stoke-on-Trent area. To this end the community has been made up of people accessing services and their support network, providers, commissioners of services, and other local influencers.

@SoTCoP’s embedded community approach has been evidenced by and benefited from its guests and visitors. These have been guests with specific technical, professional and lived experience and partner agencies wishing to set up their own communities of practice. Most noticeable of these are the partnership managers from Homeless Link who have gone on to establish over a dozen similar communities across England with support from Steve Freeman and the @SoTCoP team. A joint presentation to the UKASFP<sup>4</sup> 2018 and 2019 conferences showcased the development of both @SoTCoP and the national partnership.



In late 2018 Guy Shennan and members of the Solution Focused Collective (@solfocollective) identified communities as a significant factor in systems change and work in support of social justice. The work of @SoTCoP was presented to a solution focused conference in Boulder, Colorado by Guy Shennan and recognised for its potential in systems change and steps toward social change. Networks of communities have developed to share good practice with regard to communities of practice and their usefulness.

Within all communities there are micro communities; people accessing and providing services, teams and social networks and those people who are affected by societal issues and yet not directly involved. Effective communities of practice embrace and include all of these equally.

Practice is a broad term and can be thought of in terms of 'activity' and 'interest'. Practice is embodied in so many areas of community that it is hard to think of an exception. Formal community groups and ad hoc initiatives, third sector bodies, individuals working with their contacts, commissioned and voluntary sectors are all hot beds for practice. They are intrinsically linked and co-dependent. As such @SoTCoP and similar communities are a natural environment in which to discuss all areas of systems change. Practice also occurs at and between various levels in organisational hierarchy and structures.

Wemger-Trayner wrote extensively on communities of practice and defines them as "..... groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Andrew Cox sees them as having developed into (knowledge) management tools and an essential managerial tool. This definition, whilst understandable, is only part of the model developed by Kings College and the @SoTCoP team.

A better description of the foundation of @SoTCoP is found in Dr Michelle Cornes' words:

**"Within homelessness services recent policy developments have highlighted the need for integration and improved collaborative working and also, the need for 'Psychologically Informed Environments' (PIEs) in which workers are better equipped to manage the 'complex trauma' associated with homelessness. Drawing on the findings of an evaluation of a multi-site development programme, this paper demonstrates how both these policy aspirations might be implemented through a single delivery vehicle (a community of practice)." That definition formed the basis of Phase One of @SoTCoP.**

The introduction of solution focused principles has led to some reframing. The concept of 'complex trauma' is now viewed as 'complex survival skills' and PIEs can be seen as a natural by product of services being based in solution focused practice. This is demonstrated in the 'How to' section below.

Communities of Practice generally and @SoTCoP specifically have an impressive pedigree. From community development projects in America to the harnessing of technical expertise

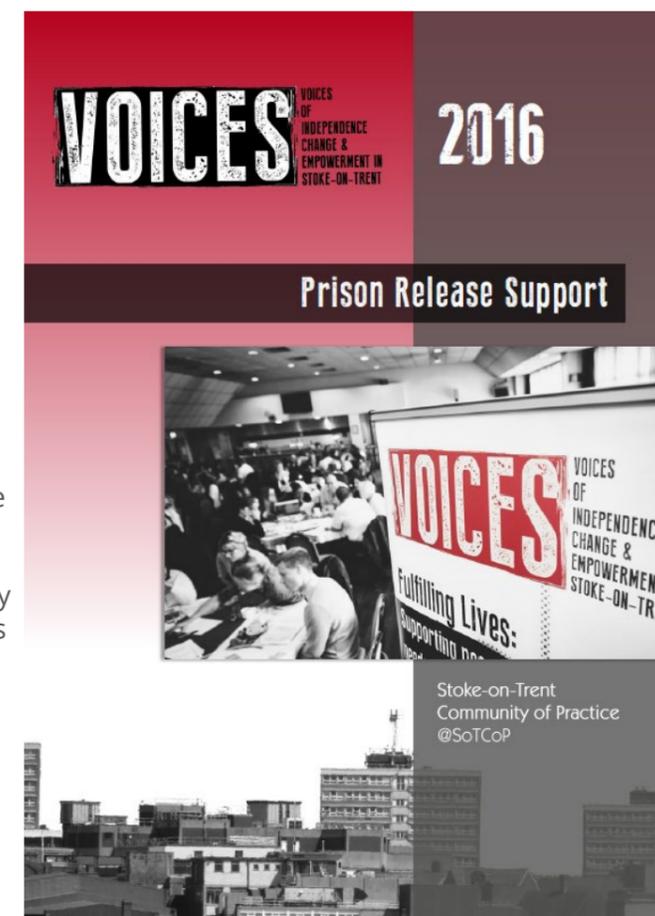


in the UK the communities described in this guide have been utilising previously untapped resources for years. The principle of working with stakeholders' expertise, examples of good practice, and small steps toward collective preferred futures ensure effective, economic and sustainable systems change in theoretical, philosophical and practical terms.

Communities recognise, encourage and work with a paradigm shift about power and authority. This has its roots in post-modern and social constructionist philosophies. Traditional expertise based on academic and professional qualifications continue to be valued. Experts by lived experience and peoples' expertise by virtue of their years of life are vital components in any conversations about, and planning of, services. All forms of lived experience are core community components. Despite this no form of expertise is preeminent. Whilst all expertise and experience are valuable in the @SoTCoP model they are all open to review and challenge.

This is not to dismiss 'professional' experience and academic rigour. Stoke communities has often invited 'expert witnesses' to take part in sessions. For example; when discussing prison release, it was noted that the group had no representation from the prison service. A former prison governor was invited to offer his expertise and lived experience for the community to better understand the entire situation. This was balanced by a community member who had experienced life as a prisoner. The common ground in narrative and aspiration led to productive discussion. Significant change developed as a result of this in terms of both practice and knowledge capital for group members. The relationship between community and prison services improved and systems to prevent release to homelessness were initiated.

For communities to be truly effective and for @SoTCoP to be so successful it is essential that they have a competence-based philosophy. In practical terms this is supported by the philosophy and language of solution focused practice. Each person attending a @SoTCoP is viewed as inherently competent and is assumed to be co-operative in defining and designing the communities' preferred future. Communities which are made up of experts by experience and qualification and which include a diverse population with a common purpose have their own legitimacy. Communities are not elected and yet demonstrate their relevance and representation by their inclusive nature, breadth of membership and areas of influence. Community legitimacy is also derived from the evidence of improved understandings, relationships and outcomes.



**"The difference between a Community of Practice and a meeting is the environment; meetings take place 'across the desk': at this community it was me and the prison governor chatting. I was seeing through his lens – this gave me an insight into the pressures and constraints the service faces. I gained a better understanding of why things are done and why they are needed. This would not have happened in a meeting. It's about creating an environment with a space for open discussion and recognising that everyone's knowledge and experiences are equally valuable. This is the only way to create change."**

**— Former Prison Inmate**

A word of warning for people considering community working must be added at this point. In common with many systems change endeavours, communities challenge the silo mentality developed by and within organisations and cultures. Communities ask questions of individuals, organisations and systems. They also empower people to initiate change and to challenge these systems. For some people in some organisations this will be a breath of fresh air and for others it will be perceived as seditious. Communities creatively undermine taboos and traditions, myths and beliefs which underpin many areas of culture and practice health and social care provision. Recognising, valuing and including lived experience contradicts the pathological and disabling views which underpin far too many assessments and influence too many conversation, practices and policies.

**“The CoP provides protected time which is essential in the sector due to how busy we all are alongside peers from both statutory and non-statutory services coupled with lived experience, to resolve an issue and inform practice.”**

— Housing Manager

Competence based culture, philosophy and practice is an essential part of the @SoTCoP model. Opening remarks should be welcoming and should also set the scene for the ‘hosted conversation’. A further core principle of community working is that it is a meeting of people with a common interest in change. This common interest is evident in people’s attendance and contributions. Community members should be reminded and reassured by seeing and hearing that there exists a culture of No Name, No Blame, No Shame’. It is neither “a talking shop” nor a place to simply complain without offering ideas on ways to develop better communities. Topic does not mean Agenda.

Hosting a community does not give the commissioner, team manager or organisational leader control. This really is a flattened hierarchy. Paradoxically the community Chair’s role is to use their authority to explain that this is the case. The Chair is speaking on behalf of community members. It is their role to remind traditional managers that a “useful list of ideas” has no part in a community despite their best intentions. This is a critical paradigm shift reflecting the solution focused principles that underpin the @SoTCoP model; it recognises and validates where power lies in planning and executing change.

## Why develop these communities?

Key questions for commissioners and teams will include “Why host communities?” “What is their purpose and rationale in a resource limited environment?” “Why communities when there are so many other models?” The answer to all these questions is both simple and complex. Simply the @SoTCoP model is inclusive and provides concrete actions and outcomes. At the same time, they are a mechanism for ‘systems change’.

For example, a (series of) multi-agency meeting(s) might result in outcomes for isolated cases. Effective communities will address both the immediate problem and identify the systemic barriers that have led to those needs. This, in turn can influence changes in working practices, form collaborative working partnerships, and learning gained can be shared with influencers through information relating to gaps in the system and through the sharing of examples of solution-focused responses and best practice.

The safe space and competence culture of a well-run community mitigates many of the traditional flaws of meetings; defensiveness and silo mentality evaporate and are replaced by a spirit of practical optimism, energy and ‘the art of the possible.’ Communities do not represent a panacea and cannot cure all social ills. And yet they do identify that change is possible rather than asking “Is change possible?”

**“It first enables us to get a real understanding of an issue; it’s depth; how and who it impacts, and hammers home why things need to change. It captures different services’ awareness through to breaking an issue down to understand the barriers and causes.”**

— Housing Charity Manager, Stoke-on-Trent

As such communities are ‘political events.’ Not Political in terms of party politics but political in terms of their impact on the processes and influences which govern social care, local government, service provision and the population which they serve. Communities have robust evidence of their role as instruments of systems. This gives credence to their value for money for teams and organisations.



COPRODUCTION IS MORE THAN CONSULTATION

PROCESS DEMONSTRATES HOW THINGS CAN WORK; PEOPLE TELL YOU WHY THEY WORK AND WHY THEY DON'T WORK FOR THEM

LISTENING AND LEARNING WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE PUTS PEOPLE IN THE LEAD OF SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY



## What is a 'facilichair'?

The terms 'chair' and 'facilitator' are used interchangeably in the guide. Chair is a term which has connotations of power relationships and autocracy. Facilitator has more than a hint of the person with the flipchart doing their best at an away day. And yet both Chair and Facilitator are requisite and equally important functions for any effective Community of Practice. All Communities are meetings of minds and groups of experts in their own experience. To make the most of this a degree of 'facilitation' needs to take place.

The term 'facilichair' was coined by Andy Meakin and isn't used widely in the guide. And yet it describes the dual roles of chair and facilitator that are central to making the most of communities. It is an important part of the chairs role to set the scene and develop an environment in which people feel able to express themselves freely and constructively.

**“There almost seems to be hesitation and anxiety when it comes to the crunch; they all know that it must be done but often want it on their terms, dictating the landscape and the rules of engagement. Using language and terminology that is thought to be beyond our realm of intelligence, thus discounting us from any conversations relevant to services and institutions we have been a part of. Luckily for me this was never the case with the SOT model; in fact, from inception, it was of upmost importance that we recognised the true value of the voice of lived experience and encapsulate it in a way that could be beneficial for all in the City.”**

— Expert Citizen

Competence based culture, philosophy and practice is an essential part of the @SoTCoP model. Opening remarks should be welcoming and should also set the scene for the 'hosted conversation'. A further core principle of community working is that it is a meeting of people with a common interest in change. This common interest is evident in people's attendance and contributions. Community members should be reminded and reassured by seeing and hearing that there exists a culture of 'No Name, No Blame, No Shame'. It is neither "a talking shop" nor a place to simply complain without offering ideas on ways to develop better communities. Topic does not mean Agenda.

Hosting a community does not give the commissioner, team manager or organisational leader control. This really is a flattened hierarchy. Paradoxically the community Chair's role is to use their authority to explain that this is the case. The Chair is speaking on behalf of community members. It is their role to remind traditional managers that a "useful list of ideas" has no part in a community despite their best intentions. This is a critical paradigm shift reflecting the solution focused principles that underpin the @SoTCoP model; it recognises and validates where power lies in planning and executing change.

A chair 'manages' the process. A 'facilitator' enables people. In the @SoTCoP model the roles are merged, adapted and interwoven by the facilitator. This hints at the skill set required for this role. This can be a challenge and is best dealt with by the community as a team with the Chair supporting rather than taking the lead. It is also an opportunity for the role to be seen clearly. We know that people are inherently competent. We also know, from experience with @SoTCoP and solution focused principles, that resistance is a person's unique way of cooperating. People demonstrate cooperation simply by turning up and taking part. What appears to be aggression can be recognised as someone being passionate. Equally someone who is quiet may well be thoughtful or in need of support from the group. Any actions which appear to be less than constructive are an opportunity to 'validate and move on'. It is vital to respect and work with the constraints of others. Respectful curiosity is the preferred approach. Asking questions of people in order to better understand their perspective is essential. "Could you say a little more about that?" "The group really needs to know more on this. Could you explain it briefly to help us better understand?" Optimum and most useful engagement depends upon the Chair and community members working together and maintaining their 'respectful curiosity'.



## Establishing a Core Group

Core groups are essential components of communities and develop organically and iteratively. A 'core group' of people soon develops. And yet it will fall to the originators of the group to ask, "Who should be here?" at every opportunity. People who have no direct link to the topic for a community are an invaluable asset. These "neutral experts" need to be recognised and valued. They should be invited to all community sessions and included in all communication and decision making. They will often be the person who breaks tension with a simple question or who will be able to 'see the wood for the trees.' Experts by their unique experience are essential members of any core group as discussed earlier.

## What's a Community of Practice (CoP) without the voice of lived experience?

Lived experience is a vital asset that sits at the heart of a community of practice. A key principle is that the lived experience of service users, consumers, clients, and customers is of equal value to that of practitioners. As such, a community of practice should always use its best endeavours to attract and support people with experience at the front end as users of services to be part of the community. However, if that's not possible, the next best option is a relevant case study from that perspective.

**"One of the key ingredients of an effective CoP is the viewpoint through the lens of those with the experience of the issues up for discussion. If we fail to include this, then all we are creating is a multi-agency meeting, not a true COP in the sense that we in Stoke have been accustomed to over the past few years. Having had conversations with professionals from all backgrounds up and down the country, the consensus I get is the dilemma they face dealing with the conundrum of how to include lived experience."**

— Expert Citizen



## Sharing Good practice and outputs from the community

One of the core principles of community working is the sharing of good practice.

This need not be a time-consuming process and yet it is a key to the success of communities in systems change, community development and the provision of better care. Care in this instance relates to the broadest aspects of community health and cohesion.

Here are a few examples of sharing, proven effective in Stoke-on-Trent.

Establish a community email list of attendees, invitees and other interested parties. Share information about good practice, developments, presentations and outcomes: people who should be part of the conversation may have restricted access to the sessions for a number of reasons. Emails and reports have been described as 'a lifeline' by @SoTCOP members

Summarise the notes and the recollections of the chair and co-facilitators, then write a summary report at the end of each session and a more detailed report at the end of a series of sessions. Keep reports brief and to the point. The details of the conversations are less important than the recommendations and the breadth of community members represented. Make a note of any useful resources and share these: compiling and updating a resource list can provide a valuable resource for the community. This may already exist in a partner agency.

A report isn't necessarily a tome of prose. Taking a creative approach can be much quicker and often of equal or more value. A rapid output will have to maintain momentum and give the community a sense of achievement and purpose. As such, a report can consist of photographs taken on the day of whiteboards or post-it notes or flip charts which a short explanatory paragraph for each. With prior planning, these can be compiled 'live' during the session and drawn together by documenting the concluding remarks and recommendations from the Chair.

Circulate the report and session notes to community members via the email list and invite them to share it as necessary. Web hosting of reports makes circulation much easier. Community reports benefit from an introduction/forward from the chair. This acts to identify the community as an independent body with multi-faceted representation. Include a thank you and invitation to future meetings in all correspondence.

Conference presentations and workshops always generate interest. These can be of the changes observed and the process by which this has happened.

Social media are a great way to share the 'small victories' and individual examples of good practice. In all above be mindful of confidentiality, consent and compliance with organisational or regulatory rules including, for example, GDPR.

**"We find our participation in the CoP invaluable in both keeping us abreast of current issues; informed as to what research and work is being done across the city; providing a platform for us to share our experiences and to learn; to meet others and network for the benefit of our services and customers and most importantly to make a real difference and inform best practice."**

— Housing Charity Manager, Stoke-on-Trent



## Community of Practice Legacy

As noted above @SoTCoP has had a significant impact on practice and culture. Here are a few examples.

- The style, philosophy and language of the sessions have had an impact on meetings and discussions beyond the community. Assumed competence, respectful curiosity and lived experience have all become more common currency in a range of areas.
- A common factors approach has developed and diffused into those influenced by @SoTCoP. Regardless of peoples' environment or background a common problem being discussed by a group of people indicates common factors which can be recognised, recorded and validated to form the foundations on which progress can be built. As an example, the support from community colleagues led to greater confidence on the part of a social worker who proposed a system change to their manager with the @SoTCoP team's support – see Case Study.
- The @SoTCoP Twitter account worked in a similar and yet much more limited way to the mailing list. It differed in attracting 'followers' rather than by seeking permission from members and has a broader geographical and practice-based membership.
- Hard outputs and outcomes include reports on a range of topics authored by Sharon Sharman. These reports were based on feedback from every meeting in a topic series. The amount of data to collate was significant and challenging. Nevertheless, the reports provided a comprehensive digest of topics, discussion, contributors and recommendations. It is worth noting that several of the topics and recommendations have subsequently been seen in national initiatives from leading bodies in the health and social care sector<sup>1</sup>. We cannot claim to have directly influenced such initiatives as the challenge to short prison sentences. We can, however, demonstrate that we recognised the challenges and recommended the very same changes in the Prison Release Report (2016)<sup>2</sup> a year before the 2019 statements.



## Case Study

At the time social care staff were not authorised for lone working out in the local community. This put strain on working time and being able to visit a person relied on the availability of colleagues. With demanding caseloads this constraint made regular contact with people difficult to achieve. Through regular attendance at the @SoTCoP a Social Worker listened to case studies and discussions that included insight into safe working practices in relation to lone working. She was then able to approach management to confidently raise awareness of the frustration and to present real examples of safe lone-working practice. Outcomes included:

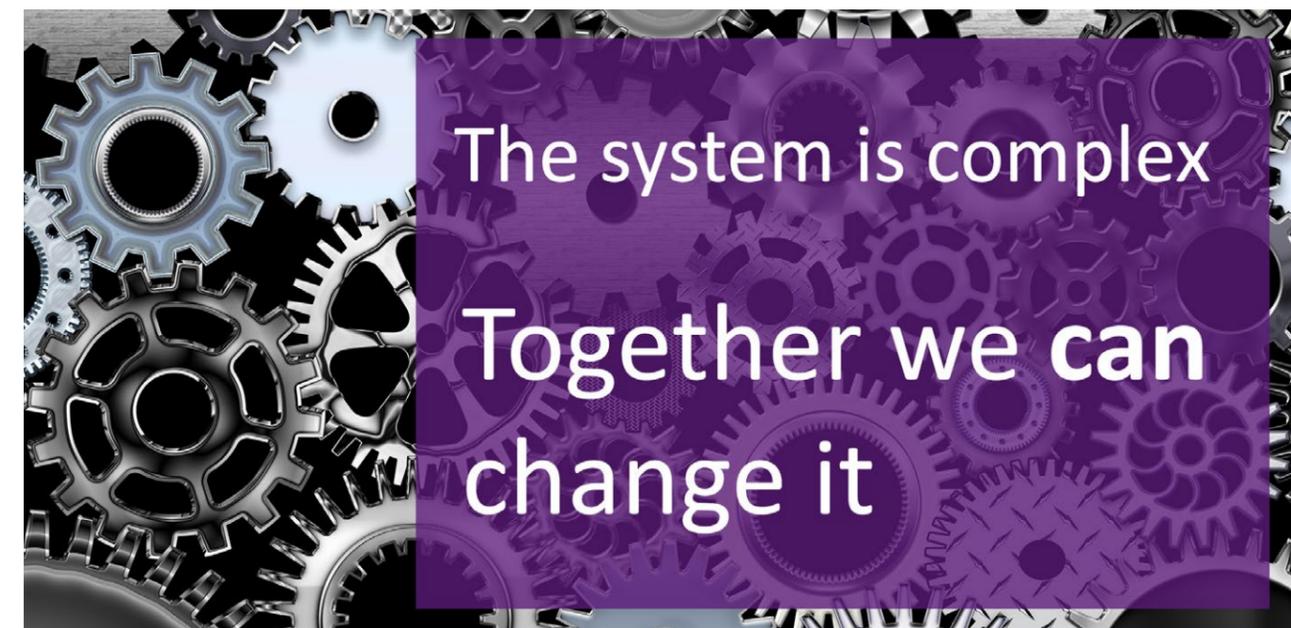
- Lone-working procedures changed
- Well-being improved
- The confidence to influence change increased for @SoTCoP members
- Improved service for those accessing Social Care

## Supporting a national initiative

Following a presentation of @SoTCoP and then joining the community, a national homelessness charity received support through training and supervision sessions from the Chair of @SoTCoP as part of the development of networking communities of practice.

## International community interest

Guy Shennan, an independent solution focused consultant and trainer, based in London, demonstrated a keen interest in @SoTCoP – in particular- the inclusion of lived experience and the culture of the community. Following a visit to VOICES in 2018 where Guy met with key members of the community, Guy used examples from Stoke-on-Trent within a presentation he delivered in Boulder, Colorado. More information can be found on Guy's website<sup>3</sup>. Guy is currently working on the development of a cross Atlantic community of practice which he describes in his blog<sup>4</sup>.

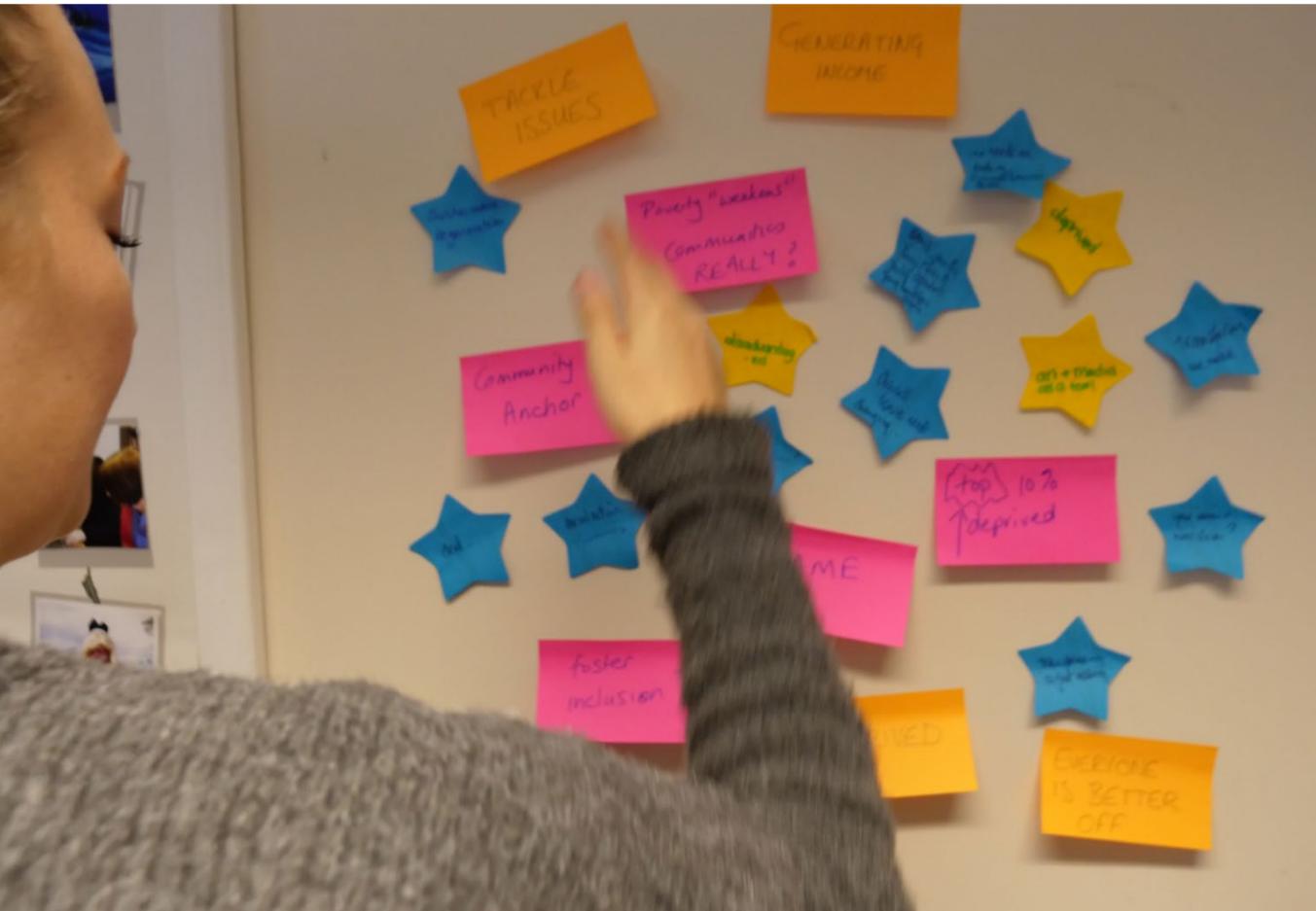


## @SoTCoP Next Steps

It has been suggested that all communities have a life cycle which is shorter than the list of potential topics. This may be because the systemic change noted above precludes the need to meet as a community. Issues are challenged and systems changed by community members in their spheres of control and influence.

Andy Meakin has referred to this as the 'informal formality of communities of practice.' Equally, as the level of confidence of community members increases, they may outgrow the sessions, take the learning gained and become busy changing their own systems.

This may well be the case with @SoTCoP and the hope is that the spread of the model continues with the aid of this guide and support from both Steve Freeman and the VOICES and Expert Citizens C.I.C. teams.



## Communities of Practice - Step by Step



- A running order is typically:*
- Meet, greet and offer refreshments
  - Introductions and best hopes
  - What's gone well since we last met? (substitute 'recently' for new members)
  - Updates on progress for this and other community topics
  - Presentation of new topic / materials relating to the current topic
  - Examples of good / best practice related to the presentation
  - Round table clarification questions in turn
  - Facilitated discussion collection of comments, statements, questions, and data as described below
  - Clarifications / recording of conclusions as well as extracting questions
  - Final thoughts comments on usefulness of today's community
  - Thanks to all from the Chair, date and time of next session if required
  - Close with networking. And finish off the refreshments!

## Next Steps: Hosting the Community Conversations

Prepare to be patient. Make sure that your 'common sense' is working well. As facilitator - Arrive early and check that the refreshments are ready. Set up the room to support conversation; a round table works well as everyone can be seen, heard and supported. Meet, greet and offer refreshments to each person as they arrive. This seems obvious and yet is often missed. This applies regardless of peoples' arrival time. "There is no such thing as late" is a common response in @SoTCoP sessions. Let people know whoever arrives is the right person; when they arrive is the right time; when leave is the right time; what they say is the right thing and is their unique way of co-operating.

Invite people to add their contact details to a prepared attendance list. The list is for the purpose of community communications and individuals will not be named or data shared without their permission. Beware of confidentiality and GDPR regulations at all points.

Recruit volunteers to help with recording events as noted below. Accept all help with housekeeping and other tasks. It's a team approach. Include as many people as possible in as many aspects of the community as possible. The group are best placed to agree how the process and outcomes will be recorded. Do this as the community progresses by a means appropriate and agreeable to the group. Examples include (in) formal minutes, sticky notes, flip charts, photographs of written material.

Ask each person to say who they are and what their best hopes are for the session. "If this session is a good use of your time what will have happened?" and "What would have to happen for this to be a good use of your time?" are useful ways of introducing best hopes questions.

A short (5 minutes maximum) presentation, verbally sharing a case study or example of good practice is core to each session. Concentrate the discussion on the key points of what works well and what would have to happen for that to happen more. The presentation can be either a prearranged speaker or a volunteer from the group. Take every opportunity to encourage members of the group to share good practice and examples that they have seen, heard about, read about etc. When examples are offered make every attempt to get as much detail as possible. Questions to achieve this might include "Could you tell me more about that?" "Who notices that this is good practice?.....and who else?....who else?"

The presentation is a starting point for hosted conversation and not an end in itself.

Invite people to comment briefly on what they have noticed from the presentation and how this fits with their experience. Facilitate this part of the session so that it is inclusive and yet "swift and light."

Ask the group to discuss their preferred future in relation to the topic. "How will you know when things are a little better?" "What will you notice when things begin to improve?" "If we had a magic wand and fixed all of this what would you/others notice, see hear, experience?"

List what is already working well for the community. Elicit existing examples of good practice from the group. These can be from any source.

Use scaling questions to establish how far things have already progressed. "On a scale from 1 to 10 how near is this to what we're hoping for?" "What would have to happen to get one point up the scale?" "What else?....what else?..." Don't forget to ask about the Good Enough. "Does this have to be a 10 out of 10? What would be a 'good enough' at this point?" These questions develop consensus and recognise differences in the group.

Discuss and agree the next steps for the group and actions from group members. Ask group members to look out for and notice small changes which show that progress is being made following the session. You don't need to be more specific than this. The more flexible the question the greater the number of things that will be noticed. Ask each person in turn what has been useful about the session and/or what they have noticed during their involvement with the community.

Determine whether a further session is desirable to either discuss this topic further or consider a different issue. Agree date, time and venue for your next session where applicable.

Thank the group for their contributions and formally close the session, allowing time for farewells and informal conversations as people enjoy the remaining refreshments.

Next steps: Subsequent Community sessions  
Repeat the list above and include the following

- Welcome anyone who is new to the group individually
- Welcome anyone who is not new to the group
- Ask community members about progress. "What small steps have you noticed since we last met?"
- Summarise progress as chair and ask for others for their views on this

Every community reaches a conclusion. This may at the end of a set number of community sessions, at an earlier or later point as the actions bring about change. It is important that we recognise and manage this. Flexibility is key.

- Whilst a community develops, and sequential systems change occurs it is possible for the community of practice to be left behind. Communities have a natural life cycle. Avoid sessions without purpose
- Regular reviews of the point in the community's life cycle are valuable. Bruce Tuckman's (1938) developmental sequence in groups model is a great way of doing this: forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning

Dissemination and Communication

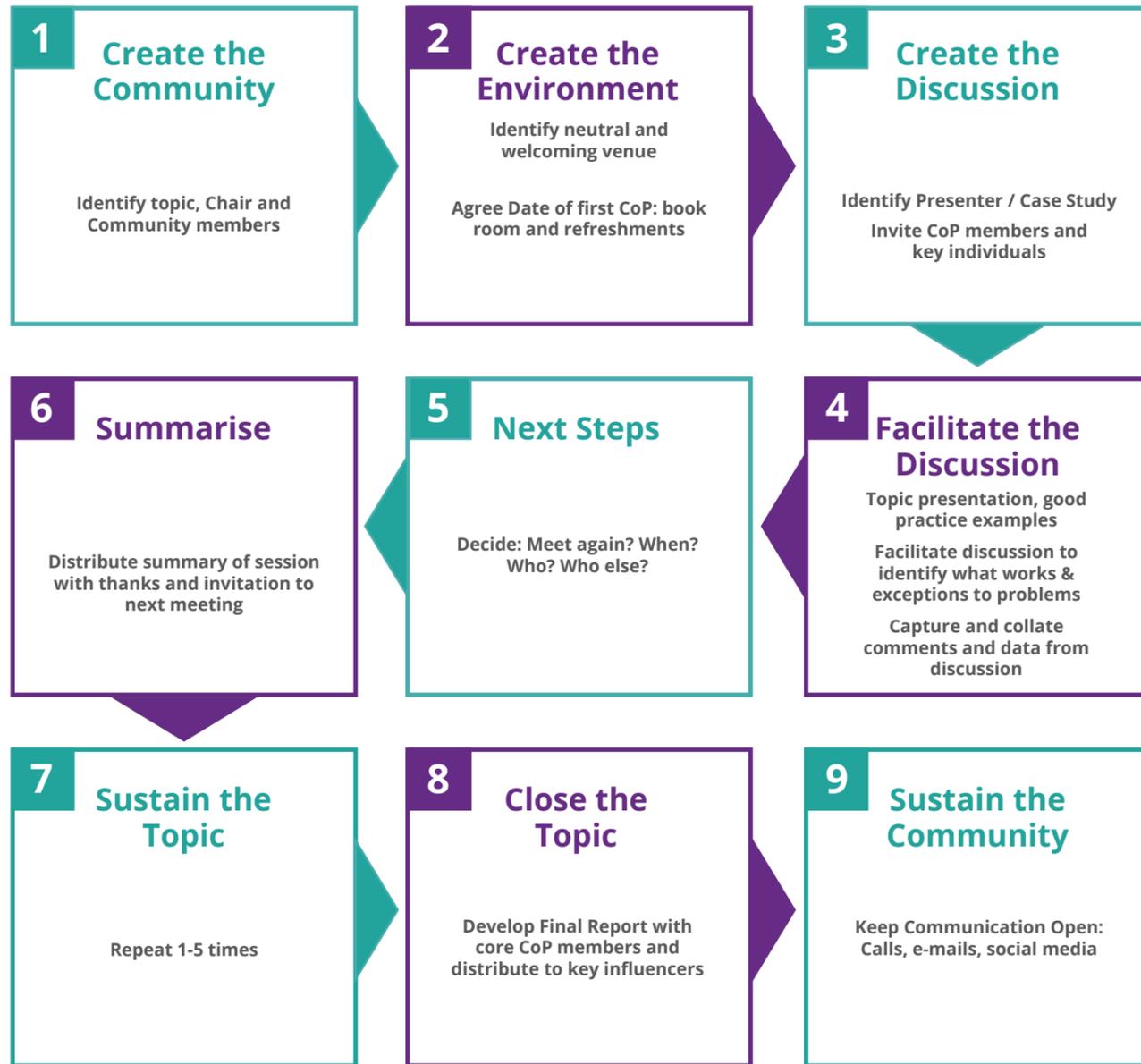
When a series of sessions are complete, and the summary report is finalised, share findings with organisations and people that can make decisions to create a preferred future.

- Identify the key influencers, groups and Boards
- Distribute the findings

If necessary, follow up with an offer of a meeting or presentation



## Aide memoire and quick reference guide



## Resources

About Communities from Kings College London

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/scwru/res/roles/communitiesdp/LittleMiracles-FINAL.pdf>

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/scwru/res/roles/communitiesdp/communities.aspx>

About Communities Theoretical

Andrew Cox

[https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/conf/olkc/archive/oklc5/papers/e-4\\_cox.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/conf/olkc/archive/oklc5/papers/e-4_cox.pdf)

Wenger-Trayner <http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>

Cornes M et al "Not just a talking shop" <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3109/13561820.2014.917406?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

About the Stoke Model of Communities

<http://www.voicesofstoke.org.uk/2018/02/22/stoke-trent-communities-past-present-exciting-future/>

Solution Focused Practice and Communities

<https://stevefreeman.org.uk/communities-of-practice-and-sfp/Solution-Focused-Practice>

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B9ER14VLReu5T21CeTdVUnVLNWc>

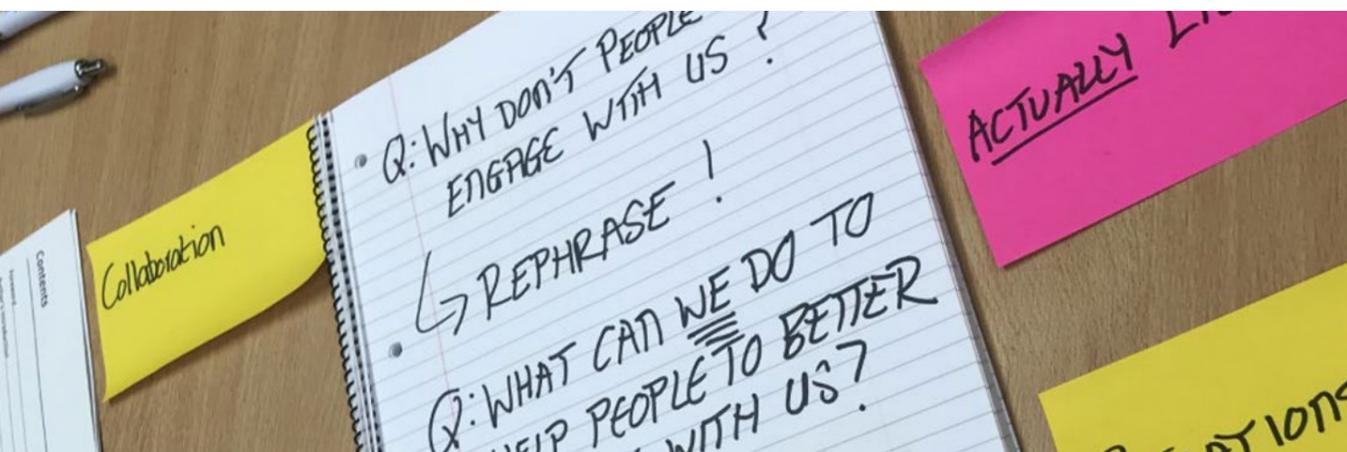
<http://www.sfpractice.co.uk/>

  
Expert Citizens  
CIC

**INSIGHT  
THROUGH  
EXPERIENCE**

[www.expertcitizens.org.uk](http://www.expertcitizens.org.uk)

 **COMMUNITY  
FUND**



**VOICES**

VOICES  
OF  
INDEPENDENCE  
CHANGE &  
EMPOWERMENT IN  
STOKE-ON-TRENT

 01782 450760

 [enquiries@voicesofstoke.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@voicesofstoke.org.uk)

 1st Floor, Federation House,  
Station Road, Stoke on Trent ST4 2SA

 [www.voicesofstoke.org.uk](http://www.voicesofstoke.org.uk)

 [facebook.com/voicesofstoke](https://facebook.com/voicesofstoke)  [issuu.com/voicesofstoke](https://issuu.com/voicesofstoke)

 [voicesofstoke.org.uk](http://voicesofstoke.org.uk)  [youtube.com/user/voicesofstoke](https://youtube.com/user/voicesofstoke)  [@voicesofstoke](https://twitter.com/voicesofstoke)