

September 2025

# **BARNWOOD TRUST STRATEGIC LEARNING REVIEW**

## **SUMMARY**

# **BRIGHTPURPOSE**

**LEARNING FROM THE LAST 12 YEARS OF WORKING FOR SOCIAL  
CHANGE IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE**



## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Barnwood’s contribution over the last 12 years.....	2
The impact of Barnwood’s work .....	2
How Barnwood has made these impacts .....	3
Leading change in Gloucestershire .....	3
Learning from the last 12 years .....	5
What Barnwood did well .....	5
What they did less well.....	5
Some things are complicated .....	6
Lots done, and much more to do .....	7

## INTRODUCTION

Barnwood Trust is an independent charitable trust serving the county of Gloucestershire. Its vision is for the county to be a place where disabled people and people with mental health conditions are equal, empowered and their rights are upheld.

Barnwood has changed a lot in the last 12 years, to become an agent of social change, working alongside disabled people and people with mental health conditions to create that change.

The Barnwood Board and Staff wanted to learn from their work over the past 12 years, to help them achieve their vision in the county. To do this, they asked us – an independent research company called Brightpurpose – to review their impact and learning. We gathered the views of 56 people in communities and organisations who had worked alongside Barnwood over the last 12 years, asking them about:

- the impact the Trust has had in the county over that period
- how the Trust made that impact
- what the Trust did well, what it did less well, what it could have done differently and what opportunities might have been missed

This summary describes what we found.

# BARNWOOD'S CONTRIBUTION OVER THE LAST 12 YEARS

## The impact of Barnwood's work

Our review focused on the impact Barnwood has made or contributed to at the system level, looking at changes for:

- the communities Barnwood seeks to serve
- partner organisations and the people who work in them
- how the system works in service of inclusion and equity across Gloucestershire

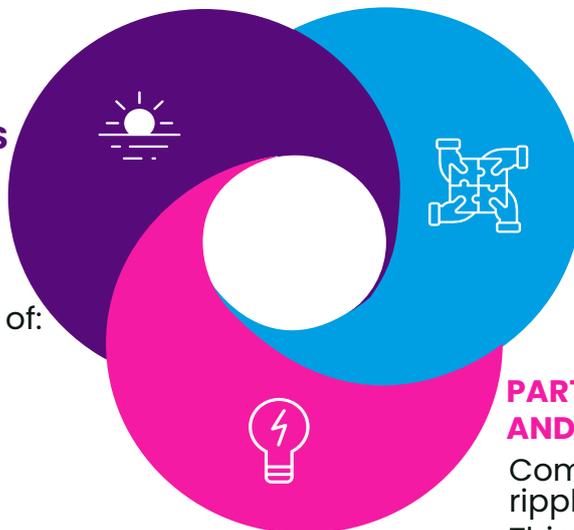
The figure below summarises what we discovered.

## BARNWOOD'S IMPACT

### **RICHER LIVES FOR THE COMMUNITIES BARNWOOD SEEKS TO SERVE**

Their voices are heard and considered  
Richer lives, as a result of:

- Evidence based interventions
- Being heard and involved
- Partners improving their inclusiveness



### **MORE COLLABORATIVE AND CONNECTED VCSE AND STATUTORY SECTORS**

Stronger relationships across organisations, at leader and practitioner level  
More collaboration and less duplication

### **PARTNERS THINKING AND DOING DIFFERENTLY**

Community Building approaches rippled into organisations  
Thinking differently about:

- Funding
- Equity and inclusion
- Engaging communities

Long term resilience for funded partners

The people we spoke with recognised that there is much more still to do. But Barnwood’s leadership has influenced them and the system to work in ways that enable richer lives for disabled people and people with mental health conditions.

## How Barnwood has made these impacts

The ways in which Barnwood made these impacts fell into three distinct categories:

- **Actions** – the things Barnwood did
- **Behaviours and culture** – Barnwood’s ways of working and being
- **Characteristics** – the fundamental characteristics of the Trust

Actions	Behaviours and culture	Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Convening organisations and individuals</li><li>• Building and sharing evidence</li><li>• Investing in evidence-led change</li><li>• Investing in skills, confidence, leadership and relationships across organisations</li><li>• Holding themselves and others to account</li><li>• Distributing grants through others</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Living their commitment to inclusion and equity</li><li>• Openness to learning, adapting and sharing</li><li>• Listening</li><li>• Offering guidance, critical friendship and a sounding board to leaders and organisations</li><li>• Wielding their power thoughtfully</li><li>• Responding in an agile way to emerging challenges</li><li>• Humility</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Financial strength</li><li>• Independence</li><li>• Credibility (earned over the years)</li><li>• Together these result in power</li></ul>

## Leading change in Gloucestershire

People told us that Barnwood was probably the only organisation in the county that had the power, independence and long-term vision to lead

genuine system change in the county. They also have influence and credibility with both the public sector and the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector.

People recognised that system change is a long and potentially never-ending journey, but credited Barnwood with having the bravery to really try.

People thought the most important things that Barnwood did to help lead system change were as follows:

- **Convening Gloucestershire Funders** – this helped funders work collectively to meet local need, and simplified access to multiple sources of funding for VCSE organisations
- **Investing in Community Builders** – Barnwood introduced organisations to new ways of thinking about and working with communities, which created a lasting legacy across the county
- **Releasing funds during the Covid-19 pandemic** – this met an urgent and growing need, and showed unity with organisations who were badly affected by the pandemic
- **Creating agile governance** – governance changes took a long time, but resulted in Barnwood being able to live its values of being Focused, Inclusive, Bold and Forward Thinking
- **Building and sharing evidence** – Barnwood invests in building an evidence base, which it shares freely with others to help them design services and influence others
- **Creating space for leaders** – Barnwood has brought leaders together to learn, problem solve and think together, which has strengthened relationships across the county

## LEARNING FROM THE LAST 12 YEARS

### What Barnwood did well

As already described, Barnwood did many things very well during the last 12 years of change. Most importantly, they have **committed to being led by experts by experience**. They have worked alongside and with disabled people and people with mental health conditions, rather than doing things to them.

Their independence has meant they could **invest for the long term**, as they are not tied to funding or political cycles. This independence has also enabled them to **respond quickly to emerging needs**.

Barnwood's staff are highly skilled at **building and nurturing relationships** with people and organisations across the county. These relationships are the foundation for being able to catalyse social change.

### What they did less well

We heard a lot more about what the Trust did well than what it could have done better. However, two consistent themes did emerge, which offer useful learning.

The introduction of **Community Building into the county got off to a bumpy start**. The initial provider selected to support the work had a very purist approach, which didn't resonate with many local people working in communities. It felt too theoretical, compared to the realities on the ground. Barnwood recognised and responded to this, and adapted the approach. As a result, the Community Builders programme is now seen as having created a legacy within the county that continues to influence how organisations think about working in community. It hasn't rippled into every part of every organisation, but people nevertheless described it as creating a lasting change.

The people we spoke with also said that Barnwood could be much better at **communicating changes**. For example:

- ending the Community Building programme
- changes to grant-making processes
- changes to strategic direction

- shifting from making individual grants directly, to distributing grants through Community Partner organisations

## **Some things are complicated**

There were a couple of areas where feedback was mixed, and interviewees acknowledged that there were no easy answers.

Firstly, Barnwood has shown positive intent to **reach more diverse communities**, and has made progress. But some of the people we spoke with felt there was much more to do to reach different ethnic groups in the county.

Secondly, Barnwood's headquarters building – **Overton House** – is a showcase of accessibility by design, which is a real positive. It demonstrates the importance of accessible design, and sends a clear message about the standards that disabled people should be able to expect. It exemplifies what is possible and desirable, and inspires others to higher standards. But it can also feel intimidating and exclusive to those who are not used to visiting or being in similar environments. It's a double-edged sword.

## LOTS DONE, AND MUCH MORE TO DO

Barnwood has led and supported change in the county over the last 12 years, and it has grown in influence and credibility over that time. As the Board and staff look to the future, they are thinking about how best to use their unique resources to best effect. There are a number of challenges on the horizon that could negatively affect disabled people, people with mental health conditions and the organisations who support them.

These include:

- Polarisation and division amongst the population, making some local communities feel less safe and the county less inclusive
- Benefits changes<sup>1</sup> affecting people's income and ability to live a full life; further burden of stress, poverty and worry for people already facing considerable challenges
- Local Government devolution, the shape and timescale of which are still unclear; we know from other regions that the uncertainty can affect service decisions even before the disruption (and opportunity) of devolution begins
- NHS restructuring, with uncertainty and significant funding reductions both affecting the ability to plan and deliver NHS services
- Continued financial challenges in statutory services, meaning less funding available for services and for funding voluntary sector activity; this leads to more competition for charitable funding too and shows no sign of abating

The people we spoke with believed that Barnwood had an important role to play in supporting the Gloucestershire system to navigate this challenging landscape.

They also saw opportunities for Barnwood to increase its impact by growing and using its influence. For example by speaking up more on key

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<sup>1</sup> Since we completed our fieldwork, the government has paused many of the changes to benefits pending a review. Barnwood and Inclusion Gloucestershire developed a joint campaign to influence local MPs before the pause, and will continue to advocate for people with lived experience to be deeply involved in the review.

issues affecting the communities they seek to serve and the voluntary sector.

They acknowledged Barnwood's credibility and trusted status within the county, which meant that they are taken seriously when they do speak up. They also noted that speaking up about absolutely everything would just create noise, and that Barnwood should prioritise a small number of issues around which to deploy their power and voice.

There was a clear message that Barnwood's focus should always prioritise the county of Gloucestershire. However, the Trust could also contribute to national learning and debate, bringing the lessons from Gloucestershire to a bigger stage. This should always be secondary to the county-wide focus, but people recognised that Barnwood has valuable experience to share, which could influence and support others engaged in social change elsewhere.



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