



## Getting Started: Being 'of service' in Taita.

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**Initiative:** Great Start, Taita

**Theme:** Working together in place

**Providing services can be quite different to being 'of' service. Great Start Taita has found that communities have a lot of skills as well as aspirations and needs. Often they want to put these skills to use *with* the organisations that work in their area rather than be clients of those organisations. This is the philosophy that underpins Great Start.**

Barnardos owns an old house in Cooper Street, Taita. Over the years, a number of services have been provided from the house, but none of them seemed to 'stick'. So in 2007, when Barnardos was assessing what kind of service/s it should run from the house, they came to a very important conclusion –that maybe the decision about the house was not theirs to make. Instead, Barnardos decided to ask Taita residents what they wanted for themselves and their community. Over a six month period a Barnardos staff member and a local social work student knocked on the doors of hundreds of Taita homes and took time to talk with people on doorsteps and around kitchen tables.

What they heard was as fascinating and powerful as the approach they had taken to let the community lead. People in Taita *didn't want any more services*. They wanted to make connections with each other and to be helped to connect with the services that already existed. People weren't asking for specific handouts. While residents clearly wanted some specific things like a park for kids and adults to use, and phone boxes and bus stops that were useable, their real interest lay in building a stronger community themselves rather than having others come in and do it 'for' them – or 'to' them.

A similar message came from conversations with other organisations that worked in the area. Other service providers did not want to compete with each other or with Barnardos. Instead people talked about a strong desire to work together, to support each other and to find different ways of working with the people of the Taita community, not just delivering services to 'clients' who live there.

The other strong message was that, if Barnardos was to get involved in the area, the organisation had to be prepared to be there for the long haul and not just parachute a service in and leave a few years later.

These messages are what Chip and Dan Heath (2010) call "bright spots". Working with the bright spots helped Barnardos to notice and build on local desires and strengths as they created goals for the use of their house, with the community. And developing ways of not only hearing local voices but also including them in developing ways to achieve these goals means Great Start is a shining example of community-led development. Building on this information from the beginning means Great Start Taita is now, four years later, a loose informal collaboration of lots of different community groups, service providers and residents who live and work in the Taita area and who are interested in Taita being a great place to live.

Much like a family, there is overlap and collaboration but this is not duplication. It is building on the many and varied aspects of the Taita community and weaving them together in a supportive fashion. And, just like the places of the conversations that started Great Start, the Great Start house is now like a family home.

"...the main room is the kitchen. That's where people gather - around the kitchen table. It's about meeting others in the community, people building their own relationships. It's a place of connection," says Karen Clifford, Community Weaver at Great Start.

Here people who come to the house are not called clients and this caused some disturbance amongst Great Start partners who were initially unsettled by such re-languaging of conversations in the Great Start house until positive and relevant alternatives were provided. At Great Start, people are simply mums, dads and children and the work is based less on meetings and more on conversation in a homely, familiar and well-kept environment. Working together is often done around the kitchen table where all parties make a contribution, rather than in organised formal meetings. At the Great Start house, the conditions for change are drawn from the neighbourhood and modelled. Chip and Dan call this "tweaking the environment", "building habits", "finding the feeling" and "growing your people".

And Great Start has had to do all these things at the organisational level as well as within their own space. Although Barnardos was prepared to do things differently from the beginning, the systems in which Great Start was enmeshed have proven to be very wedded to the status quo in many ways. Nonetheless, taking the lead from locals from the beginning underpinned a strong start to Great Start that, by creating and demonstrating, has slowly tweaked environments at these levels too.

Indeed the Taita environment is tangibly different now, with community gardens and improved park facilities where before there was nothing. People who live in Taita are more involved too. They are developing their skills to provide what is needed in Taita, doing things that previously would have been professionalised, like undertaking research, developing new activities and running them too.

There are more events and gatherings and more groups connecting through Great Start as well as a wider audience (including Council) hearing what these people are saying, including the children and are also acting on advice and information from these people.

As the Heath brothers say, “behaviour is contagious. Help it spread”. Great Start’s beginning has underpinned the community vision of Taita where a key principle is that everyone who receives any kind of support at Great Start, also becomes a contributor. There are no handouts, just reciprocal sharing, acknowledging that everyone is of value to the community and has something to offer. This kind of behaviour is proving to be contagious in Taita and beyond.

### **Key Learnings**

- Know your environment, find out more from those in it, include all of them and build on their desires and strengths together.
- Model what you hear the community wants, including both the relationships and the environments (at various levels) that can help grow and sustain the desired transformations
- Be prepared to REALLY do things differently, based on what communities say they want and need. Be flexible – these wants and needs will change! This may feel chaotic at times but feel the fear and do it anyway!

### **Key Outcomes**

- A strong uniting community vision owned by the people of Taita that now frames all local action plans: *“Connecting people to people & doing things differently”*.
- Improved relevance of Great Start activities to the Taita community and new services and activities too eg there is now a midwife operating from Great Start house where previously the community could not obtain midwife services due to their ‘high needs’.
- Growth in number and variety of activities and people involved (including those growing and sharing their skills). For example Taita timebank now has over 30 members!
- Growing community resilience through increasing emergent leadership and local skills.
- Taita’s school children are showing leadership and contributing to community (instead of being in conflict with each other) through projects and activities such as beautification of the area through Project Sunshine’s sunflower planting by children, which is being visited in July 2011 by United Nations

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### **Reference**

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