

Everyone Brings Something

Contributory Reciprocity

We often think about communities in terms of what they can give us: support when we need it, a place to belong, someone to turn to. Contributory reciprocity widens the picture. People are not only recipients of support. They may also bring a story, skill, idea, perspective, care or simply their presence.



“ *Belonging is not simply about being included. It grows when people discover that their presence, actions and contributions matter to others.*

1 People are more than recipients of support.

People can matter to others through attention, encouragement, humour, wisdom, care or simply being there.



2 Invitation, not prescription.

Contribution should be invited, never demanded. Systems should make opportunities visible, accessible and welcoming while people retain authorship over whether, when and how they engage.



3 Participation is not the same as contribution.

Attendance tells us who came. It does not tell us how someone welcomed, encouraged, taught, connected or helped shape what happened.



4 What matters is what grows beyond the service.

The value created may travel beyond the original activity: a skill shared with family, a friendship that forms, a group that continues, a confidence that becomes contribution.



5 Contribution doesn't happen in a vacuum.

People need real opportunities, a civic canvas and genuine invitation. Parks, libraries, transport, neighbourhood spaces, community halls and cultural life all shape whether shared life can flourish.





How does this shape practice?

Contributory reciprocity does not turn contribution into a target. It asks a different question: how do we create the conditions in which people can matter to one another, if they choose?

1 How Three enabling conditions make contribution more possible.

Preserve real opportunity

Reduce barriers. Keep pathways flexible. Make it easier for people to enter, experiment, return, pause and contribute in their own way.

Protect the civic canvas

Value the spaces and conditions where shared life happens: parks, libraries, transport, community halls, cultural life, informal groups and neighbourhood places.

Extend genuine invitation

People are more likely to step forward when they feel welcome. Invitation makes possibility visible without turning contribution into pressure.

2 What what does this change?

For practice

Ask not only what support is needed, but what this person might want to offer, and what needs to be in place for that to happen if they choose.

For evaluation

Notice what grew through relationships: what was shared, who was welcomed, what continued, what new opportunities emerged, not only referral numbers or attendance counts.

For commissioning and systems

Commission for opportunity, access, accompaniment and shared life, not only activity delivery. Value the conditions that help contribution become possible.

For community design

Create places people can shape, not simply places they can use. Public space, transport and neighbourhood infrastructure can either enable or constrain shared life.

3 Why when support steps back or takes over

Ethical abandonment A system retreats to a transaction or referral and leaves a person to overcome barriers alone.

Ethical overreach A system decides what a person should do, directs them towards a preferred activity or outcome, and displaces their authorship.

A different ethical orientation Contributory reciprocity offers another path: systems create real opportunities, address barriers and offer relational accompaniment; the person decides whether, when and how to engage. Contribution remains an invitation, rather than a condition of care.

4 What this adds to social prescribing

Social prescribing can make community opportunities visible and easier to enter. Its value lies in relational work, invitation and support with access, while meaning and choice remain with the person.

A referral or attendance count alone cannot show whether an opportunity was genuinely accessible, whether the person shaped the experience, or whether connection and contribution grew.

Contributory reciprocity encourages services to value the conditions for shared life, as well as the activities delivered.

“Everyone brings something. Together, we create more.”