



A review of ABCD in Leeds pathfinder sites (2019 -2025)

A six-year journey from seeds to trees



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This review has been undertaken by Leeds City Council in partnership with the six ABCD Pathfinder sites.



Foreword

We are immensely proud and grateful to present this review of the impact of six ABCD Pathfinder sites in Leeds. It demonstrates how the ABCD model has been a driving force for transformative, people-led change across our communities, not only empowering individuals but also supporting a range of strategic priorities for the city.

Championing community power is central to the Leeds Ambitions, our shared vision for a vibrant and equitable city. We are working to build a city where people have the power to make the changes that are important to them. The ABCD programme is a brilliant example of this in action and serves as a national trailblazer. Importantly, ABCD aligns closely with the city's community cohesion strategy, strengthening relationships and fostering a sense of belonging. In addition, the approach addresses the wider social determinants of health by enhancing social connections, reducing isolation, and promoting wellbeing for all residents.

ABCD has strengthened the capacity of our communities and fostered a can-do culture to bring about genuine and lasting change. I would like to thank everyone who has contributed, and I look forward to building on this important work as we continue to champion community power in Leeds.

Cllr Salma Arif, Executive Member for Adult Social Care, Active Lifestyles and Culture



“The ABCD Pathfinder Review 2025 provides a fascinating insight into the positive impact that projects with an asset-based approach continue to have in communities across Leeds.

It is clear from the findings of the review that our ABCD Pathfinder sites are a fantastic example of community power in action. The six sites have empowered local people to lead and deliver the change they want to see in their communities and the impact is a testament to their hard work, dedication, and real commitment to working in this way.

This review is an important reference point in the journey of ABCD in our City. The learning it has provided will also play a crucial role in informing how we deliver ABCD projects in the future.

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the review and especially those people who told us their inspiring stories through different case studies.”

**Caroline Baria, Leeds City Council’s
Director for Adults and Health**



Summary

This report presents findings from the Leeds Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Pathfinder review that took place from April 2024 to February 2025, and to collate and present findings from the ABCD Pathfinder monitoring from 2019 to 2025.

The review was conducted by Leeds City Council (LCC) ABCD team in collaboration and the six ‘ABCD Pathfinder’ sites. The ABCD team, part of the Adults and Health Directorate, commission, and co-ordinate the ABCD programme. The ‘Pathfinder’ sites are managed by Third Sector organisations who employ an ABCD Community Builder to work with local people (Community Connectors) in neighbourhoods and communities across Leeds.

The approach to this review was based on ABCD principles and asset-based values. We worked in equal partnership with the ABCD Pathfinder sites, recognising that everyone has lived experience and something to contribute.

The ABCD Pathfinder sites that were part of the review were:

- Better Action for Families (BAFF)
- Horsforth Community Assets Project (HCAP)
- LS14 Trust
- Older People’s Action in the Locality (OPAL)
- St Luke’s Cares
- Touchstone

In 2019 we commissioned Leeds Beckett University to evaluate the ABCD model: “Asset Based Community Development: Evaluation of Leeds ABCD” (2019 -2021)¹. This review seeks to build on that learning and to revisit the social return on investment (SROI) assessment.² The initial evaluation was an academic study undertaken during the Covid 19 pandemic when most of the sites were in year one or two when the evaluation started. We wanted to revisit and gather a deeper understanding of the impacts at a neighbourhood level, and (if any) unanticipated wider city-wide impacts had been made from funding the ABCD model.

The key questions we considered were:

- Did investing in an ABCD model for six years at a neighbourhood level have a positive impact and create a stronger community infrastructure for the people who lived in the areas we funded?
- Is there evidence of a wider impact on other organisations/institutions in those areas?
- Has continuing to invest in the model for six years raised the profile of asset-based approaches to create a culture shift in how we work as a Council?
- Is there evidence of that projects and activities will continue once the funding has finished creating a sustainable legacy.
- Are there any challenges or drawbacks to funding the model?
- What is the learning to the Council, and could there be a new way of modelling the approach?

The review process was led by Leeds City Council in partnership with the six sites. We explored the option of co-producing the review. Although the Builders lacked the time and/or capacity to do this, they worked with the ABCD team to co-design the questions the questions, supported the collection and capturing of evidence, and acted as critical friends throughout. This included reviewing the design/content of the review before it was published.

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to capture lived experiences and stories of those who have been part of the ABCD journey. This included ABCD Managers, ABCD Community Builders, Community Connectors, people living in the neighbourhoods and communities where the ABCD model is funded, key Third Sector partners, and Leeds City Council staff. This gave us in-depth insight into the impacts in those areas and has been key to this review. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this review.

Conclusions

The review has highlighted the immeasurable impact that small pockets of trust-based funding can achieve on a local level. That the smallest actions can create biggest changes to people's lives.

We have seen that investing small, trust-based funding in pockets of neighbourhoods have had huge positive impacts for the people that have been involved. Cross cutting connections between diverse communities have become deeply embedded and brought an immeasurable long-term value: true meaningful friendships. People adapted, collaborated, and created things, together. A sense of pride, fulfilment, and ownership of where they live, we saw the 'power to bring about change.' The review has shown us how vital the role of the Community Builder is.

Unanticipated ripple effects have built capacity and sustainability of other initiatives such as creation of Community Interest Companies and Community Asset Transfer that supported wider work in the community. Key themes around social cohesion being built, acts of kindness, community resilience, and a stronger community infrastructure.

The revised SROI study suggests funding the ABCD model is a very cost-effective investment to support prevention, build sustainable community infrastructure and support the social wide determinates of health. Working in this way, empowering people to make the changes that are important to them, enriches people's lives. It is a key part of our Team Leeds approach and the right thing to do.

This review has reaffirmed our commitment to the proliferation of the ABCD model, and we have concluded that the Leeds ABCD model continues to support ABCD principles and values and delivers meaningful change. This way of working will shape and inform the development of the broader commitment to championing Community Power in the city, as set out in the Leeds Ambitions.



¹ https://www.abcdinleeds.com/_files/ugd/0df445_981053de42a5430ebcabbe7e2bb2f060.pdf

² https://www.abcdinleeds.com/_files/ugd/0df445_7c3c47fb0f6e49c186c08a32901e0890.pdf

What is Asset Based Community Development?

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is a neighbourhood-based approach to sustainable community-driven development, which starts with what's strong and not what's wrong. ABCD involves a shift from a top down, institution-centric approach to a bottom up, citizen centred approach i.e. done by, rather than to, for or with the people. The ABCD model identifies, connects, and mobilises individual and community assets, skills, passions, and possibilities, focusing on the positive resources, capacities, and capabilities within a community rather than focusing on problems or needs and what needs 'fixing.'

ABCD is about bringing people together, about connecting communities and about shared action to bring about change, recognising that everyone has skills and gifts (assets) and everyone has something to contribute.



South Leeds Valkyries AGM

The Five Principles of ABCD are:

1. Citizen driven



2. Relationship oriented



3. Asset-based



4. Inclusion focused



5. Place-based



The ABCD approach asks communities to consider:

What is it that people/communities are best placed to do for themselves?

ABCD is founded on the principle that given the tools and the opportunity, small groups of people can change things that they believe need changing in their community better than anyone else. It recognises people as the experts.

What is best done by people/communities with support?

ABCD recognises that there are things best led by people but with support from outside agencies and organisations through collaborative partnerships.

What is it that people/communities need outside agencies to deliver?

ABCD recognises that institutions with specialist expertise can be the most appropriate agencies to deliver and co-ordinate services. It is not about replacing services or things best undertaken by institutions and agencies with specialist expertise in appropriate and individual circumstance.

The ABCD approach asks public services, institutions, and organisations to consider:

What is it that outside agencies need to stop doing so that people/communities can be in the driving seat of change?

ABCD is truly rooted in the community doing things by themselves not having things done 'for' or 'to' them.

Background: The Development of ABCD in Leeds

In 2013, Leeds City Council was successful in obtaining Senior Network Support (SeNS) funding through the European Regional Development Fund. The aim of the funding was to reduce loneliness in the older population across Leeds and to reach those who were not taking up or engaging with activities or social networks.

With demand for support increasing, it was recognised that we needed to work in a different way to tackle social isolation and loneliness in older people of Leeds. We saw an opportunity to test our role as partners, and commissioners in how we work at place with neighbourhoods and communities, drawing on assets, unlocking capabilities of local people, reaching, and connecting the “unengaged” through a community-centred approach. We decided to pilot (2013-2015) an Asset Based Community Development model through the Leeds Neighbourhood Network model.³

Funding three Neighbourhood networks, (we named these ‘ABCD Pathfinder sites’) to test the ABCD model to: **Discover – Connect – Mobilise.**

The ABCD in Leeds model consisted of:

- Funding a Third Sector organisation who employs a ABCD Community Builder focused on discovering, drawing out people and engaging the skills, knowledge, and talents of residents, living in the community: we call these people ‘Community Connectors.’

- Community Connectors – individuals living locally who are creators, natural networkers, relationship builders, many have trusted relationships in the area they live in. They are seen as community leaders and ‘Agents of Change.’
- The Community Builder works with residents and the Community Connectors to identify and create an ‘asset’ map of the area.⁴
- The Community Builder connects people together, highlighting what local people care deeply about and provides opportunities for them to act on these passions to spark local action.
- ‘Small Sparks’ grants – each pathfinder site has seed money to kick start ideas and support self-sustaining groups that foster social led action, and people led change.
- Share and celebrate stories of local success, focusing on how people are using their own assets and connections to drive positive change.

The builder works with the ABCD principles and follows the approach asking: What is best done by the community?

Evidence from the pilot told us that people felt connected to where they lived, felt part of a community, had purpose, and belonging, that created resilience, and this contributed to improvement of health and wellbeing of the people living in those areas. Communities self-mobilised and accessed traditional service provision less.

³ <https://www.opforum.org.uk/projects-and-campaigns/neighbourhood-networks/>

⁴ <https://www.jeder.com.au/the-asset-mapping-atlas-co-designed-by-the-jeder-institute/>

Over the next few years, we developed at pace, funding more sites and test-bedding the model working with specific groups such as people with a Learning Disability, Carers, the Roma Community, and a primary school. We continued to focus a purist approach of the ABCD, with trust-based grants and reporting through stories and conversations to evidence impact which supported the wider determinants of health. To support prevention and early intervention, we concentrated in areas of neighbourhoods in the top 1% -10% of indices of multiple deprivation and pockets of neighbourhoods that were 1% IMD inside ward areas of 10%.

Recognising the need to develop our methods of how we measured impact, we wanted to ensure we did this in a values-based way that included qualitative and quantitative measures. In 2018, in collaboration with the Centre for Health Promotion at Leeds Beckett University, we co-produced an evaluation framework with the ABCD Pathfinder sites and key stakeholders. The outcomes of the ABCD Common Evaluation Framework were:

- People have good friends.
- Communities identify and work to bring about the changes they want to see.
- People and communities are better connected and more resilient.

Monitoring focussed on these outcomes and we asked for examples of conversations, photographs and stories and number of connectors identified, number

of self-sustaining groups created, number of connections made, and number of small sparks grants given. In 2022, to support the Better Lives Strategy refresh⁵ we added a further outcome to the framework:

- People live happier, more independent lives for longer.

In 2019, we commissioned Leeds Beckett University to evaluate the impact of the ABCD Pathfinder model: 2019-2021: “Asset Based Community Development: Evaluation of Leeds ABCD”⁶ and to conduct a Social Return on Investment (SROI) study on the Pathfinder sites that were part of the evaluation.⁷ The work was led by Professor Jane South, who has a national and international reputation for her research and work on community-centred approaches to health and wellbeing.⁸

The research (completed in 2021) showed that there was strong evidence for better social connections and pathways to community change. There was also strong evidence of positive outcomes for individuals and communities that were linked to the ABCD approach. The upper value of SROI was £14.02 of social value returned for every £1 invested.⁹

The research evidenced a range of positive impacts that supported other strategic priorities in our Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2016-2021)¹⁰ key themes of the Better Lives Strategy 2017 -2022¹¹ and Leeds Best Council Plan (2020- 2025).¹²

⁵ <https://www.leeds.gov.uk/plans-and-strategies/better-lives-strategy>

⁶ [Resources | ABCD In Leeds](#)

⁷ [0df445_7c3c47fb0f6e49c186c08a32901e0890.pdf](https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/staff/professor-jane-south/)

⁸ <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/staff/professor-jane-south/>

⁹ [0df445_7c3c47fb0f6e49c186c08a32901e0890.pdf](https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/staff/professor-jane-south/)

¹⁰ [lhws 2016-21.pdf](#)

¹¹ [Microsoft Word - Better Lives strategy final 2021 with PJ's amends.docx](#)

¹² [Best Council Plan 2020-2025 in full](#)

Since 2013, we have funded 23 ABCD Pathfinder sites, working with a wide range organisations from Third Sector organisations, a Housing Association, and a Theatre Company. A clear plan for ABCD development has been produced¹³ with four priority areas and a cross-council focus that supports the Leeds Ambitions 2025.¹⁴ Based on our learning we have created a four-level approach that underpins how we work as a Council and with our Third Sector partners:

**Grassroots/
community
level**

Placed based asset-based approaches and models such: ABCD Pathfinders, time banking, self-sustaining groups, social led action and change from people in neighbourhoods that build resilient individuals and communities.

**Practitioner
level**

People in public and voluntary sectors thinking and working in asset-based ways with individuals and families to find solutions that build on their strengths and assets.

**Service
level**

How organisations and institutions build flexible, empowering, and responsive services that are delivered in new and innovative ways that draw on the expertise of people with lived experience and those communities to prioritise outcomes that are important to them.

**Whole
System
level**

How we work together to influence change in our system and create a shift in the culture of leadership to enable community power in Leeds.

¹³ [Odf445_46cc5e5ac08348acbe841a0f61cc7240.pdf](#)

¹⁴ [Leeds Ambitions_1.pdf](#)

Most sites were in year one or two when the LBU evaluation took place. Since 2021, the ABCD Pathfinder sites became further established and rooted in the community. Collation of the data collection for the LBU evaluation took place during the COVID 19 pandemic that re-focused the Third Sector on crisis response including supporting people with access to medicines and food. Six years on post COVID we were keen to work with the ABCD Pathfinder sites to re-visit and gather a deeper understanding of the impacts at a neighbourhood level, and (if any) unanticipated wider impacts city-wide had been made from the funding the ABCD model. As a Council we wanted to understand:



Did investing in an ABCD model for six years at a neighbourhood level have a positive impact and support the development of a community infrastructure for the people who lived in the areas we funded?



Was there evidence of a wider impact to other organisations/ institutions on those areas?



Has continuing to invest in the model for six years raised the profile of asset-based approaches to create a culture shift in how we work as a Council?



Is there evidence of a sustainability projects and activities that will continue once the funding has finished, creating a legacy?



Are there any challenges or drawbacks to funding the model?



What is the learning to the Council, and could there be a new way of modelling the approach?

Methodology

A meeting was held with the six ABCD Pathfinder sites to discuss their and our experiences and learning of developing an ABCD approach over the last six years. The session focused on how we had captured impact of the progress of the pathfinder sites, the experience of monitoring and reporting, what had worked and could be built on and what was challenging to record when trying to capture value-based ways of working.

It was agreed as a group that it was important to look at the impacts of funding the ABCD model in a more in-depth way. The ABCD Common Evaluation Framework supported the theory that people were connected, felt part of and drove change, but the group decided as we had used the framework to collate grant monitoring over the last five years, and used as the method for the Leeds Beckett study, we would develop an evidence based model on ABCD principles that would involve everyone, bottom to top – top to bottom, using the ABCD in Leeds four levelled approach.

The ABCD Pathfinder sites wanted to re-visit the SORI to help with future funding applications to support continuing the ABCD builder role.

During the review period, the monitoring reporting (qualitative information) stopped to allow the Builders to have time to conduct interviews and collate stories and impacts. However, we asked Builders to continue to report on the numbers of connectors, connections, small sparks, and self-sustaining groups so we had six years of figures.

We explored co-producing the review with the Builders but they had concerns about their capacity to do this. They agreed to work with us to create questions and support with the collection and capturing of the evidence and acted as critical friends throughout. This included reviewing the design/content of the review before it was published.

There was joint agreement that Community Builders were best placed to gather evidence from a grassroots level and the ABCD Team would gather evidence from the practitioner, service, and whole system level. We identified these groups:



Community Builders wanted to hold a discovery conversation and shape their own questions to the community to gather stories around the impacts at a grassroots level. We co-designed themes and created prompts to the themes as a guide to start the conversation:

- Changes in the Community: What changes have occurred in your community since the start of this work?
- Personal Growth: What personal growth have you experienced since becoming a Community Connector?
- Connections Made: Who or what connections have you made since you started as a Community Connector?

The ABCD Team invited Community Builders to provide a 'reflective journey' on their overall experiences of being a builder. We created questions for the ABCD Managers based on our grant outcomes and from feedback from ABCD Community Builders over the six years. We mapped out which Third Sector partners and key stakeholders we have worked with over the last 10 years and asked for comments and feedback about our approach. We agreed to work together to pull the evidence together. This was done over a period of 11 months.

Agreed methods were:

- Conversations with Community Connectors – stories captured by Community Builders.
- Recorded interviews with Community Builders – through video transcripts.
- Collation of five years of ABCD Pathfinder grant monitoring.
- Photographs/Videos to capture activity.
- ABCD Pathfinder Manager questionnaires – designed with Community Builders and ABCD Team.
- Internal key stakeholder feedback and statements.
- A Social Return on Investment (SROI) study undertaken in partnership with Leeds Beckett University, School of Health.



LS14 Trust, Seacroft Hookers and Knit-wits

Findings

Grant Monitoring of the six ABCD Pathfinder sites

Below we have presented an overview and highlights of six years grant monitoring of the six ABCD Pathfinder sites that were part of the review.

Pathfinder sites were asked to provide quarterly monitoring based on the common evaluation framework outlined on page 10. This involved an onsite visit, sometimes we would walk around the area and meet other connectors and builders would talk to us about their experiences over the quarter. The ABCD team held regular meetings to discuss the reporting and feedback from the Builders that could help inform our work internally and how we could develop training and development opportunities for the Builders to support their work.

All sites initially found the first six months the most challenging, with many Builders commenting that having complete autonomy to work in this way was very new to them and that not “giving you examples and any numbers” in the first six months somehow meant they weren’t validating the work or “doing something”.

Most, if not all, Community Builders told us the challenges of capturing and reporting on the numbers we asked for. We had seen gaps in the quantitative reporting that some Builders inputted ‘lots’ when we asked for ‘number of connectors/connections’.

They expressed that they found it difficult to record numbers of connectors/connections, with some finding it difficult to see the difference between a ‘connector’ and a ‘resident.’ We worked with them to create factsheets about the role and functions of a Community Builder and Connector and agreed that while the language we used was not important to the community,

the number of connectors would be recorded in the monitoring report.

Progress with getting “things off the ground” and building trust had taken a lot of time, energy, conversations, and cups of tea! Builders reported that they had to be “OK” if things (ideas, projects, or activities) did not take place as people changed their minds or other things in their life took priority. We saw evidence of time banking activities: skill-sharing, acts of neighbourliness, building of social networks and building of social capital.

Similar to the Leeds Beckett Evaluation findings, the asset map, although useful and a good starting point, the value was more in the process than the end result.

Keeping energy up, empowering people to foster capabilities and potential and mobilising people took time and some quarters we received little quantitative and/ qualitative information in the reports.

Some Builders asked for guidance around values of small sparks money to be given out and what was “OK” to spend the money on. We asked the Builders to share examples of how the money was spent but did not set an upper or lower value limit on level of spend. We responded to the feedback and changed the reporting requirements to every six months with a ‘story so far’ every quarter.

We saw innovative ways in which small sparks were used, ranging from participatory budgeting meetings, gardening groups, natter benches to help with social isolation, craft groups, street parties, a Natter café, community gardens, street walk art exhibition, bike fixing groups, events and celebration days, a plant library, a dungeons & dragons’ group and film screenings.

We saw many examples where these ideas continued after the money was spent, suggesting that internal assets within the community were utilised to ensure their continuation.

There were common themes around red tape in accessing assets such as Council owned buildings and spaces. Forms to fill in, keys to have permission for, these things held up the momentum of some activities and projects. Community Builders reported that some Council staff were unaware that the Third Sector deliver the ABCD model and the Council works in an asset-based way to support the model. It was also highlighted that there is still a misunderstanding around the language of ABCD in the city.

We saw a change in the relationship with Community Builders and Leeds City Councillors over the five years period. Initial reporting told us that some Councillors although open to the approach, misunderstood the role of the Community Builder and the process of asset-mapping, with one Councillor believing that they decided what those assets were in the community.

The ABCD team worked with the Community Builders and we delivered a series of training information briefings and workshops for Councillors.

Over the last few years, we have seen a change in the reporting to reflect the positive input of local Councillors:

“I recommend acknowledging the vital role of local councillors in supporting community builders. In my experience, Burmantofts and Richmond Hill ward councillors have been especially supportive of my work in Lincoln Green, contributing directly to our success. Where such support is lacking, communities may face greater challenges.” **Jennifer, Community Builder, Touchstone.**

Builders told us that initially people in the community sometimes did not understand their role and at times [the community] could not see how they were not support workers as they were paid for by an organisation. Core to the work was building trust as much as possible and also working with people to empower them to see they had the power to make the changes that were important to them.

The monitoring collated over the life of the grants evidenced that outcomes that scored the highest were in ‘improving wellbeing’ and ‘individuals and communities are better connected.’

‘Communities identify and work to bring about the changes they want to see’ and ‘people have good friends’ scored as significant. We also collated evidence of working with children and families, stories and evidence of activities involving people with protected characteristics and progression to skills, education and/or employment that scored as significant.

We saw no areas that scored in the lowest quartile, though on the lower end of the scoring, ‘climate change/climate action,’ ‘housing’ and ‘ageing well’ were the least reported.



Number
of Small
Spark grants
awarded:
150

In year three of the grant, we noticed that Builders and connectors were reporting on ripple effects in the community.

LS14 Trust

Terry's daughter got involved with SCOT football club and has gone from a "very, very shy kid" to someone who's really come out of her shell.

His daughter's involvement in the team led to Terry getting involved as a photographer at the matches – "people looked forward to the photographs as if the parents can't make it to the matches, it's like they're there in a way!"

- This has led to friendships off the pitch, both with the children and the adults.
- *"...as the parents, like we're on social media, we'll meet up for a coffee, or generally, just do something as a group. It's really nice."*
- Terry

OPAL

[Richard] first stepped into OPAL's 'Welcome In' Cafe during a dog walk as he noticed there was a 'dog friendly' sign - had a sausage sandwich and got drawn in by the warm welcome and sense of community.

- That first visit has since rippled into joining the book club and singing group. That gave him the confidence to get out more and introduce himself to new people.
- He then visited a man in the community who was lonely:
"I've got to know a little bit more and how you all operate, I thought that I'd like to do something to contribute to all of this. And so, I've just started to go and visit a person in the community who was a bit vulnerable, a bit lonely. Took a deep breath and went to see this person and it was actually tremendous just to be able to sit and listen and to talk a bit." Richard.

St Luke's Cares

Eunice has been a key member of the community who has helped make changes to Brickfield Park - helping to secure new equipment and making the area much nicer with plants and litter picking – *"every time I pass the park it fills me with such a pride."*

Eunice

- Being part of the park, Eunice felt enthused and more confident to become a member of the South Leeds Valkyries, a women's basketball group.

LS14 Trust, SCOT Football Club



Touchstone

The photography collective ‘Beyond the Lens’ started off as a small group of individuals whose lives have been shaped by migration – refugees, asylum seekers and people from settled or second/third generation communities. The group has developed from smaller ‘show and tell’ events and is now working towards a major exhibition in summer 2025. Regular gatherings have built strong interpersonal networks from diverse backgrounds.

There are now plans to formalise the group as a small charity to ensure long term sustainability.

Better Action for Families

Julie received small sparks funding from BAFF and put on some mosaic workshops in her local community in south Leeds. The first session was mostly attended by women and then it developed to involve diverse groups in the community (including LGBTQIA+) and in different areas across south Leeds.

- This experience built Julie’s confidence
- and she decided to bring women together
- in the community through monthly
- women’s circles in her own house.
- *“So, I open my house up, and right now I’m*
- *running monthly women’s circles and just*
- *inviting people from the community to come*
- *and join us. That is going really, really well. I*
- *get regular members, and then new members*
- *come and go, but it’s just nice that I have*
- *built this confidence up to be able to work and*
- *facilitate these community activities.” Julie.*

Horsforth Community Assets Project

Small sparks had enabled Caroline to hire space for the repair cafe which then to the launch of one being opened in Pudsey.

- *“...and I mean we’ve also helped to start the*
- *ball rolling on some other repair cafes because*
- *we have done such a great job. We’re actually*
- *the leading cafe in Leeds and so we’ve helped*
- *to set up the Pudsey Cafe and other cafes*
- *because people have seen that it works and*
- *through that they’ve been inspired to take*
- *action themselves” Caroline.*

They estimate to have helped over 500 people, providing advice, and often being able to fix and mend the item for them. *This was in the first year they set up in 2023.



Number of
Small Sparks
initiatives:
123

Community/Grassroots Level

‘Community Connectors’ and people living in the neighbourhood/community.

Key themes from these conversations were: *Well-being, Reciprocity and Growth: Community Engagement and Cohesion, Social Connection and People Empowerment Personal Achievements, Recognition and Pride, Community Resilience and Legacy.*

Well-being, Reciprocity and Growth

Meeting the ABCD Community Builder had an incredibly positive effect on the Community Connectors we spoke to. It was a common theme that being encouraged to explore their gifts, skills, and capabilities, meeting others, and creating social connections through shared interests and the setting up and/or being involved in activities and projects had a positive impact, to their health, confidence and personal development.

Residents reported being a part of and/or creating activities and meet ups created a sense of connection and belonging. Having had their confidence raised, some reported feeling inspired to move forward in their own lives. Community Connectors who were encouraged by ABCD Community Builders to set up/be part of the activities/groups commented that they were instilled with a sense of pride in where they lived and motivated by a passion to give back to their communities. A sense of ownership of their community and empowerment was common throughout the stories. The benefits to their wellbeing were described as therapeutic. The positive impacts were observed to multiply as they spread to others involved in the groups.

The significance of these impacts has been instrumental in changing lives of the people who have been part of the ABCD model in the areas funded. One Connector noted that participating in ABCD activities led to meaningful connections and personal growth and that overall, they felt that the journey has helped them develop both socially and personally.

One comment we received explained that the participant believed that taking part in the activities wasn't the important part of their involvement but rather the support that they received and were able to give in return. Having the opportunity to talk about the things they had endured had been impactful.



Case study

LS14 Trust

Wellbeing Warriors

Heidi's Story



1 The Beginning

Heidi has lived in Seacroft all her life and feels strongly connected to her community. She first got involved with LS14 Trust during the COVID-19 lockdown, taking part in online activities like art therapy. This helped her see the value of community support and creative expression which led to her creating a local group called the Wellbeing Warriors.

Although she has faced tough personal challenges, including addiction, mental health issues and trauma, Heidi began to turn her life around by joining local groups and using available resources. A key moment came when she decided to stop drinking and set small, achievable goals, starting with a 30-day alcohol-free challenge. This marked the beginning of a positive shift in her mindset and a focus on personal growth.

“ It’s actually opened a lot of doors for me, in a way, because it’s boosted my confidence to know doing what I set out to do. And that’s to inspire people to do the same, you know...

...I did do it for other people, but I’ve got so much out of it myself.”

Heidi, LS14 Trust



2 The Journey

As Heidi’s interest in holistic practices like mindfulness, breathwork and meditation grew, these helped her deal with anxiety, pain and emotional stress in a healthy way. She was then able to encourage others to take part by supporting them to understand the benefits of meditation and how it can be used to clear the mind.

Her local group called the Wellbeing Warriors has been running for over a year and has managed to attract other members of the community. Heidi was successful in creating a space where members felt listened to and empowered, where they were able to feel safe and supported. Part of the reasons behind this, Heidi claims, is that people are attracted to her honesty and personal life experience.



3 The Impact

Heidi’s influence has spread well beyond LS14. Her story has inspired people across the UK, with individuals from Wales and Scotland reaching out to her for online sessions. As her confidence has grown, she’s become a strong leader, helping others who want to overcome addiction, trauma and isolation.

Looking ahead, she plans to reach even more people through courses, creative projects and online platforms. Her journey shows how powerful personal experience and community support can be in helping people heal and grow.

Community Engagement and Cohesion

Community Connectors reported that the ABCD Community Builders' way of creating and holding an inclusive space to have a chat, a cuppa, meet ups, activities and events created opportunities and connections to explore what people had in common and what brought them together. This broke down barriers, building a "big happy family" atmosphere.

Focusing on the strengths and capabilities of people in the community, brought together many groups of people from diverse backgrounds and cultures that helped to create a sense of community and mutual support.

We heard that people from diverse cultures engaged in conversations with people they had not previously met and of community events that brought together different generations around food and fun activities. People reported feeling connected to the spaces they live in. Connections between each other and focusing on what they have in common, sharing knowledge and skills, has created a sense of community spirit, cohesion, and community resilience.

One Community Connector mentioned that through being able to understand the wants, hopes, dreams and aspirations of their community, they were able to help them (the other people living in the community) achieve the things that they wanted to do. Another told us that they were enthused to volunteer in other projects elsewhere in the community following their initial involvement.



Case study

Horsforth Community Assets Project (HCAP)

Horsforth Repair Café

Caroline's Story



1 The Beginning

Caroline, a passionate local resident, helped spark the creation of the Horsforth Repair Café by recognising the existing talents and interests within her community. Inspired by the Horsforth Climate Action Group, she saw an opportunity to bring people together around shared values of sustainability, creativity and mutual support.

Rather than imposing a solution, Caroline embraced an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, listening deeply to what people cared about and enabling them to act on their ideas. With support from Small Sparks funding, the group was able to access a venue without financial strain, allowing them to test the concept in a low-risk, high-trust environment.



2 The Journey

The Repair Café quickly became a vibrant monthly event, powered by the skills and generosity of local volunteers. From professional fixers to hobbyists, people stepped forward to share what they knew and loved. This created a space where relationships flourished, not just between volunteers, but across the wider community.

People came to get items repaired, but stayed for the conversation, the sense of belonging and the joy of contributing. The café welcomed everyone, students, retirees, parents and neighbours, creating a truly intergenerational and inclusive environment. Caroline and her team didn't just build a service; they nurtured a community.

“They've found a sense of community that didn't exist beforehand”
Caroline, Horsforth Repair Café



3 The Impact

The success of the Horsforth café inspired others. Caroline supported the launch of similar initiatives in Pudsey and beyond, demonstrating how local leadership and shared learning can ripple outward.

The Repair Café has become a self-sustaining community asset. Donations now cover venue costs and the café has a long-term agreement with its host space. Volunteers and attendees continue to shape its future, ensuring it remains responsive and rooted in local needs.

For Caroline, the experience was empowering. She felt pride in co-creating something meaningful and lasting. Though she has stepped back, the café continues to thrive, proof that when communities lead, they build resilient, adaptable solutions.



Social Connection and Empowerment

Many highlighted the importance of socialising and expanding their social networks through being involved with the ABCD model. The opportunity to be part of something, get involved, run and be part of an activity, group or project have provided platforms for people to share experiences, support each other, and enjoy communal activities, which has been particularly beneficial post-COVID.

Relationships of trust have been built upon and meaningful friendships created. Residents have used words like 'family' and 'connection' to describe the relationships they had built on the back of an ABCD initiated activities and projects.

Through repeated engagement with the ABCD Community Builder, the activities and social connections made with other residents, individuals were observed (by community connectors) to have become more confident and more willing to approach other people outside of the area, whilst also feeling more comfortable asking for support to access other services that the ABCD Pathfinder site could refer them too. Being encouraged to contribute more to their community, created a sense of ownership and a willingness to take on leadership roles.

Others reported feeling like they had a newly found purpose and a meaning in their life, which transferred back to their home life.

From the responses, we understood the power of kindness and saying hello and the happiness that building friendships has had at the grassroot level, while having a support network to go to regularly to share their feelings and emotions has been fulfilling and created a meaning to people's lives.

“It's helped me become more involved with the community and I've taken on projects elsewhere in the community and a lot of it is due to whoever I've met through the garden.”

Christine

“I have helped my own personal self, within my health and within my confidence, and by gathering a group of people together, it has helped them also, and now we all support each other like a family.”

Claire

Case study

Older People's Action in the Locality (OPAL) Scalextric: Building Community Dans's Story

1 The Beginning

Dan's journey with OPAL began two years ago when he walked into a community café with his dog, not knowing what to expect. That simple step marked the start of a transformative experience. Initially a visitor, Dan quickly became a familiar and valued presence in the community. His openness to connection and curiosity about others laid the foundation for meaningful relationships. Reflecting on this, Dan shared that he wouldn't have known as many people or heard so many fascinating life stories, had he not taken that first step into the café.



2 The Journey

Dan's involvement deepened when he initiated a monthly Scalextric group at the OPAL Centre. With support from Ellen, the Community Builder, Dan envisioned an inclusive activity that would appeal across age and gender. What started as a simple idea evolved into a vibrant, intergenerational space where people could connect, compete or simply observe and chat.

The Scalextric group became more than just a hobby, it became a catalyst for community building. Dan noticed that people who might not attend other events felt comfortable joining this one. The activity broke down barriers, encouraged participation and fostered conversations that extended beyond the event itself.

Dan's role as a Community Connector grew organically. His warmth and approachability made it easy for others to engage. He received Christmas cards, greetings from passersby and ongoing conversations that reinforced the

3 The Impact

On a personal level, Dan gained confidence, friendships and a deeper connection to his neighbourhood. He emphasised that the benefits weren't just for others, they were for him too.

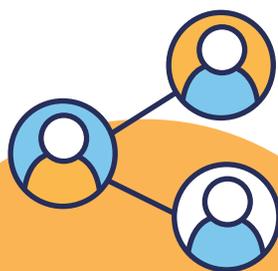
On a community level, the Scalextric group became a space where intergenerational relationships flourished. Children found surrogate grandparents, older adults shared skills and stories and those experiencing bereavement or isolation found a welcoming environment. One particularly touching moment was when a bereaved man, initially hesitant, attended and found comfort through connection.

People see Dan as a "Community Champion", an individual who extends the reach of community building through his creativity and commitment.

Personal Achievements, Recognition and Pride

The stories Community Builders gathered speak of various achievements, such as winning prizes at produce shows, successful event planning and acknowledgement for their efforts. These accomplishments have boosted confidence, community morale, provided a sense of fulfilment and brought recognition to the participants and their projects. We heard of the positive impacts around feeling ownership over the things that had been built and a feeling of self-improvement, many of which were unexpected when initially becoming involved with the Community Builder.

Feelings of fulfilment were described along with the realisation that individuals had the power to bring about change and that they felt empowered to take an idea through to realisation, which in turn has instilled a sense of pride in contributing. One Community Connector who had never held a job previously, told us that organising a project themselves was something they had never done. People have shared the real value of the opportunity to develop their skills and confidence.



**Number of
connectors:
1509**

Community Resilience and Legacy

Many Connectors are looking to continue and broaden their initiatives, ensuring long-term benefits for the community with one likening the project to a seed that has now become a tree with branches.

Having had the opportunity to build on their own ideas, share skills and knowledge, there is a willingness and motivation to continue self-sustaining groups and activities that have been established. Many have plans to replicate these positive experiences and continue the momentum. In some cases, people have been incentivised to apply for grants and reach out to other groups in Leeds to share learning.

The success of these projects has inspired the establishment of similar initiatives in other areas, showcasing the potential for community-led projects to influence broader change and act as a catalyst to lever in other people's time, skills, knowledge that contribute to continued activity.

“ And when you are attached to a community, you feel proud of living wherever you live. So, I think it makes people feel proud of living in Beeston and Holbeck and wanting to help it make it better. ”

Clara

There are ongoing plans to expand community involvement and organise more events after the ABCD Pathfinder grant funding ends, indicating the sustainability, continuation, and continued growth potential of the projects in the areas we have funded.

Case study

Touchstone

St Barnabus Soup Kitchen

Irene's Story



Irene, St Barnabus Soup Kitchen

“we're so proud that we are changing lives here because we realise that people are lonely and this place provides a space for where people can go and meet others”



1 The Beginning

Irene became involved with St Agnes Church in Burmantofts with a simple but powerful vision: to create a welcoming space where people could access a hot meal and feel part of a community. Initially serving just one or two individuals, Irene and her team opened their doors with warmth and optimism, cooking meals without knowing how many would come. Their commitment to hospitality and quality food quickly drew attention and appreciation from local residents.

From the outset, Irene embraced the principles of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), recognising the strengths within her community and the potential for collective action. Her partnership with Touchstone provided foundational support, enabling her to build a space that was not only about food but also about connection, dignity and wellbeing.

2 The Journey



As the soup kitchen grew, so did its impact. Irene and her team began serving between 40 to 70 people weekly, including those unable to attend in person through food deliveries. The initiative expanded to include signposting to services, assistance with Universal Credit forms and access to food bank provisions through partnerships with organisations like Give a Gift, FairShare and KFC.

The soup kitchen became a hub of transformation. Volunteers who initially came as clients found purpose and confidence, evolving into active contributors. Irene observed how individuals developed social skills, built relationships and became more engaged in their community. The space offered more than nourishment, it offered hope, friendship and a sense of belonging.

Support from Touchstone's ABCD initiative and Small Sparks funding enabled Irene to provide nutritious meals, including meat which would otherwise be unaffordable. Despite financial constraints, the team remained resilient, resourceful and deeply committed to their mission.

3 The Impact

The soup kitchen has become a lifeline for many facing isolation. Irene speaks passionately about the visible changes in the lives of those they serve, individuals finding companionship and volunteers growing in confidence and capability.

Beyond individual stories, the initiative has fostered a thriving network of relationships and mutual support. Many community members, including elected Councillors, have witnessed the tangible outcomes, reinforcing the value of grassroots efforts. Irene's work exemplifies how local leadership, compassion and collaboration can drive meaningful change.

Practitioner Level

ABCD Community Builders

The most common themes collated from the ‘learning journey’ were - *Empowerment, Capacity Building, Building Trust and Relationships, Culture Change, Flexibility and Challenges and Positive Impacts and Legacy.*

Empowerment and Capacity Building

Community Builders reported that they empowered residents to take ownership of their ideas and projects and that this boosted confidence and self-reliance. Shifting the narrative that paid community development workers are present in communities, ‘doing to’ and ‘for’ people at times was a challenge. By exploring with them their own skills and capabilities, having strength-based conversations towards enabling them to do for themselves, created a sense of empowerment. This shift of power to those people they worked with has encouraged them to make decisions, solve their own challenges that affect their lives.

Being able to have the autonomy to work in this way, disregard restrictive structures, deficit-based models and frameworks that focus on ‘client groups’ and ‘service users’ built the builders’ confidence and empowered them in their role, enabling them to focus on “developing the heartbeats of community interest.” Feeling confident and trusted to develop the role, the builders felt they were better able to listen to the community and make connections. This led to the opportunity to facilitate reciprocal change, springboard ideas, activities, and projects, resulting in unexpected and even wider ranging impacts.

- “Working in this way meant that we
- could really take the time to listen to our
- community, find more people in the area
- who were interested in the same things,
- and connect those people together, making
- more projects possible. It also meant that
- we could offer more, we could facilitate
- support for those groups, offer advice and
- guidance, and even offer some financial
- support with the Small Sparks funding. I
- had more time to organise things, and so
- many groups were more successful.”
- **Jo, Community Builder LS14 Trust**



Woodwork workshop

Building Trust and Relationships

Establishing trust and strong relationships within the community has been essential for the effective development of the ABCD approach. We heard that the focus on relationships was beneficial in relation to reducing isolation and connecting people. This resulted in positive outcomes and new opportunities for both individuals and communities. Some Community Builders viewed it as their role to create a culture of trust and collaboration and bring about a shared purpose. Although it was identified that trust has taken time to build, it has been encouraging to see people build friendships, that have developed without the Builder, that have gone on to be true meaningful friendships. Some of the Builders commented that they felt their presence in the community has helped support them to realise their goals and turn them into reality. Examples were shared that helped us visualise how friendships were built included crafting, photography, and single-parent groups. These groups outlined the desire to explore and enjoy personal interests and hobbies with others who share the same interests and who have similar needs to improve the quality of their lives.

Builders also commented on the importance of the Council trusting their way of working. One Builder commented:

- *“It has been great to have flexibility and*
- *autonomy to go where the work leads*
- *rather than to have to follow a prescribed*
- *path, with the trust and belief that each*
- *pathfinder will do their own thing and work*
- *in their own way and for that I would thank*
- *the LCC ABCD team. They also listened*
- *to our feedback for example with the*
- *monitoring and responded to the feedback.”*

“ It has been a joy to engage in developing the heart beats of Community interests without the restrictive structures of pre-defined criteria and frameworks. ”

Jo, Community Builder, St Luke's Cares

Culture Change

It was observed that changing the traditional way of working, shifting from a deficit model and the transition to working in a purist ABCD way has been challenging and difficult. It has involved moving away from doing things to people and instead standing back and encouraging them to do things for themselves. We heard that initially, shifting one's own mindset was necessary, especially in relation to looking at 'what is strong not with what is wrong' and that concentrating on the resources already available within the community was challenging. Builders commented that it took time to 'devolve' and to not default back to a 'fix it mode' mentality and physically step in.

Builders recognised that having an open mind, listening and embracing organic development, growing, and learning together (over many cups of tea!) has been key in supporting the community to create their own solutions and mobilise themselves. Where in the past individuals and communities have relied solely on the Council to help them, the culture change has been in realising that communities can do things for themselves. Amongst the examples that were shared were crafts and litter picking groups, as well as the creation of play zones for children.

Flexibility and Challenges

Community Builders have faced challenges which they were able to overcome through flexibility and autonomy in their roles. It was mentioned that working with people is never straightforward, especially because it is necessary to support people to build the confidence and capacity to accept responsibility and ownership. Conflicts did occur between individuals and groups and so it was necessary to initiate conflict resolution at times, which was challenging whilst also keeping engagement levels consistent and ensuring inclusivity.

To navigate these challenges Community Builders described that being patient and having a flexible and adaptable manner and focusing on what brings people together helped the work. The role of a paid ABCD community worker was mentioned by one Builder to be valuable in supporting the engagement of ideas, interests, and motivations of community members. Another told us that other Third Sector organisations don't always 'get it' in relation to working in an ABCD way and often don't prioritise looking for funding to work in this way.



Number of
self sustaining
groups:
105

Positive Impact and Legacy

The work of Community Builders has had a lasting positive impact with 105 self-sustaining groups created and projects continuing beyond their involvement, creating a legacy that continues beyond the life of the Community Builder role. The interviews and monitoring collated indicated that many groups and projects that have been set up because of small sparks have continued to flourish. People had expressed to the builders a sense of “community spirit.” Achieving lasting impacts was felt to be an objective for the role of the Community Builder and in that, leaving behind a legacy of empowerment and ownership was necessary. One Builder mentioned that the work had fostered a helpful connection between community members and the local authority that had helped to make a positive difference in the area, such as better maintained parks and cleaner streets, that were now cared for by the community, resulting in people feeling a sense of pride in where they live.

Developing and sharing of skills and knowledge within the community has also been seen as an impact that the ABCD model supported with new ways of approaching things as well as providing the motivation to bring fresh ideas. Some of the Builders told us they felt a sense of “career fulfilment.” One Community Builder expressed that she found her role as a Community Builder as a “transformative experience” to be life-changing and vastly different from her previous work in finance.



Lantern Festival

Case study

St Luke's Cares Friends of Trentham Park Samina's Story



1 The Beginning

Samina got involved with Friends of Trentham Park in Beeston Hill because of a desire to help revitalise the local green space that had been overlooked and underused for many years. Motivated by a strong sense of community, she joined the small group of residents who wanted to make the park a fun and welcoming place for families and children.

From the beginning, Samina showed great dedication and creativity. She took part in summer activities like chalk drawing and bubble play for kids, and helped set up raised garden beds, hanging baskets and other decorations. Her early efforts helped make the park more inviting and inclusive and she quickly became a valued and active member of the group.



“...we can as a community, all help each other, try to look after the park so it can be more enjoyable for people to come and sit with their children and stuff and is safe”

Samina, Friends of Trentham Park

2 The Journey

Over time, Samina's role grew and changed. She became the group's treasurer and a key community connector, someone who didn't just take part but helped bring others in. As she took on more responsibilities, her confidence grew.

Samina's leadership went beyond just organising things. She built strong relationships with other community members, Council staff and local organisations. Her involvement opened doors to new experiences, like family outings, art projects and local events which benefitted both her and her children.

Samina has developed a strong sense of ownership over the park and its future and speaks up for its care, inspiring others to take pride in their shared environment.



3 The Impact

Trentham Park has been transformed thanks to the efforts of Samina and the Friends of Trentham Park group. The park is now a clean, welcoming space with new play equipment and beautiful flowers. It's a place where families gather, people connect and wellbeing is supported.

Alongside these physical improvements, the local community have come together in the park through activities such as litter picking, flower planting and activities for children, adding to a sense of neighbourliness.

Personally, Samina has experienced significant growth. She also feels more confident, has made new friends and had new experiences that have enriched her life.



Service Level

ABCD Pathfinder Managers

The ABCD Team created standard interview questions for the ABCD Managers, we wanted to capture their experience of managing the grant and their reflections of the ABCD journey for the community.

Common themes were - *Recognition and Trust, Grassroots Development, The ABCD Pathfinder model, Community Builders, Adaptation and Resilience Collaboration and Support, Partnerships and collaboration.*

There was also an emphasis on the importance of community-led initiatives and local volunteer involvement.

Can you tell me about your journey of becoming a pathfinder site over the last 6 years?

From the responses given, it was apparent that prior to the funding from Leeds City Council in 2013, there was evidence of Asset-Based approaches already happening in Leeds, although the terminology and language used to describe the way of working hasn't always been recognised or entirely understood within the Council. One manager commented that at times the term 'ABCD' has been used in a jargonistic way to describe the recognition of the strengths of individuals and places.

It was recognised that an integral part of this journey has centred around the importance of the role of the ABCD Community Builders. They have brought various skills and innovative ways to engage with people. They have shaped community initiatives, led by their own interpretation of and autonomy in the role. We were told of some of the challenges that the organisations have faced in their delivery of the approaches, particularly in relation to lack of community spaces and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Common elements in the journeys of the six organisations however, involved an emphasis on community-led initiatives and local volunteer involvement, which has been key to strengthening, building trust, and embedding the work within communities and other community development efforts. There was no consensus on whether delivering the approach was an extension to the work of these organisations or a principle that could be embedded into their work, except for one manager who commented:

“ This [the ABCD] approach has been central to our delivery and strategic thinking ever since. The LS14 Trust, and indeed the wider ecosystem in Seacroft, has been fundamentally shaped for the better by ABCD principles ”

Howard Bradley, LS14 Trust Strategic Lead

How much has the ABCD pathfinder model influenced the organisation's way of working in the community?

Managers told us that the Pathfinder model has had a significant and positive impact on their organisations and the communities they serve but that ABCD had not been a new concept for them with most of the organisations feeling that they were already working under this ethos, if not under the label of ABCD.

The main way in which the model has been observed to influence the organisations is in the breadth and depth of the reach allowed to them by having the funding for a paid ABCD Community Builder post to proliferate the approach. It was mentioned by more than one manager that they would seek funding to continue the work of a dedicated Community Builder. We heard how for one organisation, having a staff member specifically allocated to the role had supported the organisation to remain true to their core values and from another how the model had instigated a more intergenerational approach to the people they worked with.

As mentioned by another manager, the ABCD Pathfinder model has helped to strengthen the community approach that was already embedded in the organisation.

“We had already made a strategic decision that we should be community focused and this role fit perfectly with this strategy. Have the community builder has helped us reach the wider community, has helped to make our local community more integrated and has given individuals the opportunity to shine.”

- *“It’s finding the right balance to support*
- *people to empower them rather than*
- *supporting people to disempower them.”*
- **Ailsa, CEO OPAL**

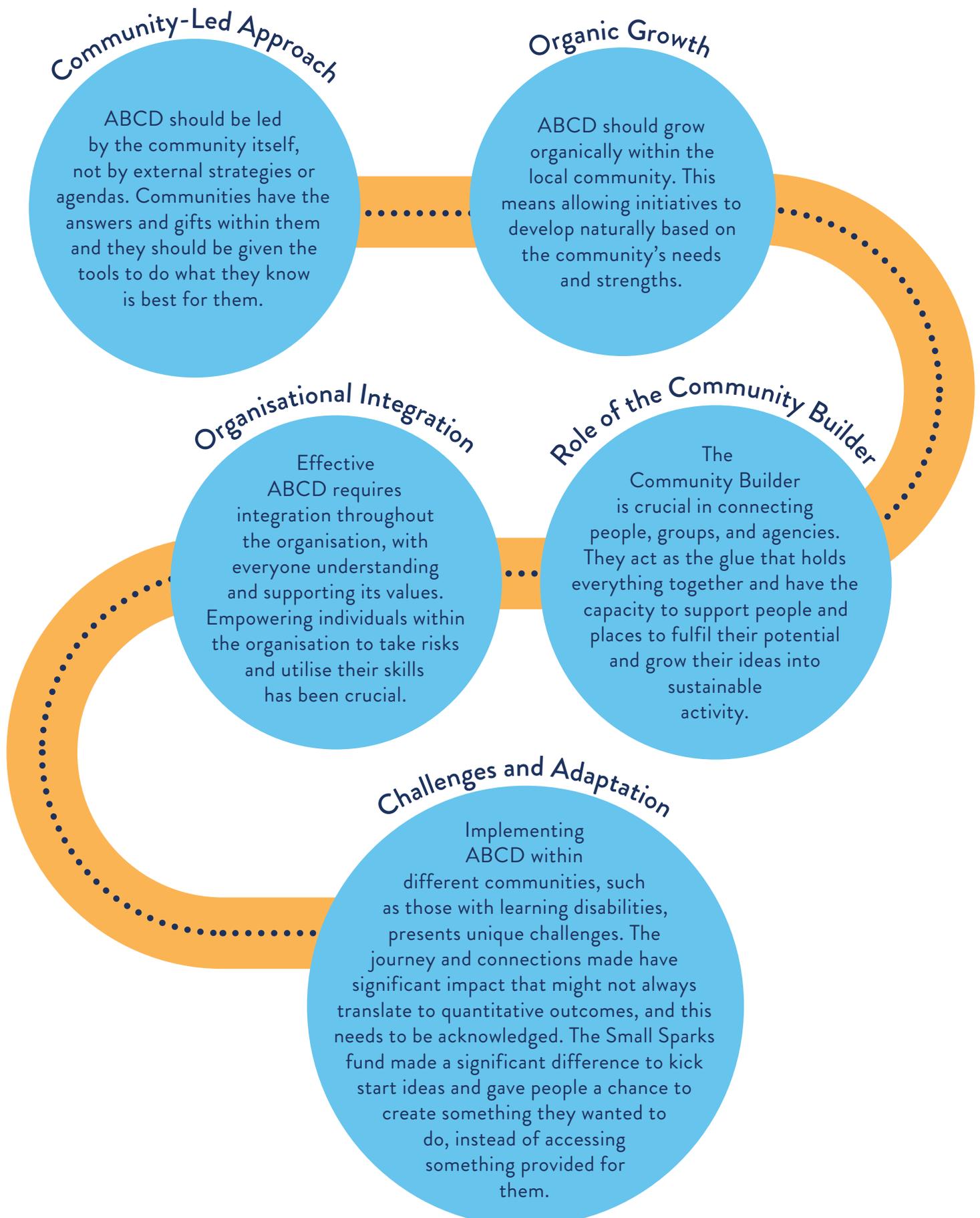
Of the six sites, only one was a national organisation and we could not find any evidence that delivering an ABCD model influenced any changes to that organisation.

Volunteers at Horsforth Community Garden



As a pathfinder site, what does ABCD look like to you?

We have pulled together key themes from the responses received:



What has been the impact of this work in the community because of adopting the ABCD model?

Managers thought that the model has had a profound impact, empowering residents to make positive changes in the communities they work in. They highlighted that Small Sparks had funded hundreds of activities and projects, such as a raised flower bed for wheelchair users, art clubs, groups for people with mental health, tea and chat groups and intergenerational events that supported and empower residents to make meaningful contributions. We heard how these efforts have fostered a sense of community and collaboration. One manager said: “[That’s the] magic of the model.”

The increase in voluntary participation and the development of strong relationships with other organisations post-COVID-19, like the establishment of We Are Seacroft, are testament to the success of the Pathfinder model and we heard strongly how the approach has helped individuals make significant contributions to their communities, creating spaces for people to connect and support each other.

The flourishing of community projects in Horsforth, such as those led by the Hall Park Management Committee and various groups led by enthusiastic individuals, further demonstrates the positive impact of the funding. Stories shared of people gaining confidence, feeling empowered and taking ownership of their projects were testimony to this work.

“ The ABCD approach has empowered residents to make positive changes in their community. Small Sparks has funded projects, creating accessible gardening spaces, running mosaic making courses, and groups for mental health, disabilities, and more. Additionally, efforts have been made to educate groups about ABCD, including creating an easy-read map to ensure inclusivity. ”

Lynn Bailey, CEO Better Action for Families



Do you think adopting the ABCD model has impacted on your partnerships with other organisations, and how? e.g. Leeds City Council, Health, other Third Sector organisations?

We heard how the ABCD model has fostered collaboration and strengthened partnerships with various VSCE (Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise) organisations with impacts being felt on both local organisations and the wider Third Sector.

The Beeston Community Wellbeing Fair, partnerships with groups like Skippko and Incredible Edibles and city-wide projects such as the piano trail (part of the Leeds International Piano Competition) are excellent examples of how ABCD can create opportunities for individuals to contribute to their communities. Some of the work garnered attention from media outlets like the BBC, highlighting the importance of supporting local community groups.

The strong community collaboration in Seacroft, particularly the success of We Are Seacroft and the co-ordinated response to COVID-19 was evidence that partnerships with local schools, councillors and the Local Care Partnership have been instrumental in fostering a supportive and resilient communities, where in Horsforth, the close working relationships with various community groups and leaders have enabled the delivery of diverse events and services.



Family Fun Day

“ ABCD allows space to work with really tiny, grassroots, volunteer led organisations that are often forgotten about, but play a vital role in our community’s health, wellbeing, and resilience. ABCD has a lot to teach the wider health system about how we should be aspiring to work with people. It allows systems to see different ways of working ‘with’ people, not ‘doing to’ them. ”

Rory Wells, ABCD Pathfinder Manager, Touchstone

Whole System = Key Partners & Leeds City Council Stakeholders

Partners: These were key organisations from the Third Sector that have had a working relationship with the ABCD Pathfinder sites.

The ABCD Team met with and asked the same questions to each group:

- Please detail your involvement with the ABCD Pathfinder site or community builder.
- What benefits have you seen from having a community builder in place?
- What has been the impact of this work on the community?

Partners reported they had different working relationships with the Pathfinder sites, ranging from engaging with Local Care Partnerships, to working closely with the builders at a localised level to engage people.

When discussing the impact, we heard strongly that these relationships seeded learning around the ABCD values and ethos, that could be used to achieve broader engagement with a diverse range of people, and groups and ultimately reach more people. Organisations working in collaboration with Community Builders were able to tap into the valuable insights of the approach.

We heard that co-production and collaboration, significantly benefitted communities by leveraging the diverse skills, knowledge, and resources of all participants, it improved the chance of success of initiatives while building capacity and sustainability in those community areas. It was recognised that the Small Sparks money had supported and enabled connections and actions that may not have started without the seed money to do it.

“ [ABCD Pathfinder sites that have been involved with the LCAN city-wide listening project] have driven an asset-based approach to the project that as a network we believe is crucial if we are to genuinely and deeply listen to understand the knowledge and wisdoms within our communities. ”

Hannah Bailey, CEO Voluntary Action Leeds

- “BAFF always bring a strong community offer to events, bringing a wealth of knowledge of Inner South communities, (...). This approach has enabled us as a citywide infrastructure organisation to extend our offer to people and groups we wouldn’t have been able to engage with on our own.
- Working with Gayle and Lynn, I have also seen real world examples of how the ABCD model can inform and impact on the local health and care system, through the connections made between people, communities, and organisations.”
- Karl Witty, Volition (partner in Forum Central)

We heard that having a Community Builder in the areas the partners worked in provided a greater reach into the community, while also being able to utilise the builder’s in-depth knowledge of an area, trusted connections they have made with people that complimented delivery and supported in the development of ideas from the community.

Stakeholders agreed that the Pathfinder sites have played a pivotal role in the formation and development of important advances in the Third Sector across the city, including the Leeds Community Anchor Network (LCAN). It has been observed that their contributions have been instrumental in embedding the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) theory and practice within the communities in which they sit.

The established Pathfinder groups were well-prepared to deliver the Neighbourhood Matching project, we were told. Their understanding of ABCD allowed them to shape the project from the outset, focusing on building strengths and aspirations within communities. We learned that the ABCD Pathfinder managers contribution to the LCAN city-wide listening project has been significant. This has enhanced that project’s impact through additional UK Shared Prosperity Fund work investment.



Leeds City Council Stakeholders

These were members of staff in Leeds City Council and Public Health that the ABCD Team had been working with in some capacity with experience of working with the ABCD Pathfinder sites. We asked for feedback about their experiences of working with the sites/builders and what they saw as positive impacts.

The ABCD Pathfinder sites have been viewed as a great asset that have been highly valued. It was recognised that the sites have been able to drive and create deep networks of connectivity and work in areas that Council staff have not previously been able to engage with. A ripple effect of reciprocity was acknowledged to have taken place in areas with ABCD sites.

Stakeholders highlighted the unique contribution of the Community Builders in “empowering local residents to be part of developing solutions, to embrace and enable community ideas wherever possible” it was recognised that this approach has had a “significant impact on residents.”

It was acknowledged that the ABCD programme has supported a culture shift in some service design such as Get Set Leeds Local¹⁵, a Public Health initiative using a ‘Small Spark’ model¹⁶ and the use of asset-based values and approaches within Public Health Needs Assessments¹⁷.

One colleague recognised that the work supports the Council strategically, that resources are invested effectively and the approach is sustainable once funding has ceased.



Woodwork workshop

“As part of the Council’s locality working transformation journey, there is a growing appetite to explore how ABCD and Community Power principles can shape future models of place-based working. Insights from the Locality Collaboration Workshop in Hunslet & Riverside Ward highlighted that embedding ABCD and community-powered approaches should be a key driver of public service reform - supporting a more preventative, integrated, and locally responsive model of delivery. The learning and experience generated through the ABCD Pathfinder sites will be invaluable in informing this next phase of the locality working agenda.”

Andrew Birkebeck, Programme and Partnerships Manager, Strategy & Resources

¹⁵ [0df445_7fc688c034a64ab6a6cf4576eb0a9fed.pdf](#)

¹⁶ [Small Sparks funding in Leeds - MindWell](#)

¹⁷ [Leeds Observatory – Health & Wellbeing – Leeds public health needs assessments](#)

We heard about the positive impacts of ABCD Pathfinder sites and Community Builders that were part of multiagency partnerships. The Local Care Partnership (LCP) team spoke highly of the ABCD Pathfinder ethos and ways of working from the sites they had worked with.

One notable highlight was the participatory budgeting event, organised by a Community Builder to distribute Small Sparks funding. This event was the culmination of a year's worth of 'discovery' work in the local community, where the builder walked streets and visited places (restaurants, the laundrette the local shops, libraries) where they could bump into people to engage and start conversations to build connections, explore skills and strengths and involve the community to foster empowerment and leadership.

“ They [ABCD Pathfinder sites and Community Builders] all have a proactive attitude and willingness to try different things. The specific work LS14 Trust have undertaken to work with LCPs to explore what asset-based partnerships could look like was particularly good. Their method of delivery was one of sharing and learning from each other rather than promoting themselves as experts and this brought out a lot of positive discussion.

Kim Adams, Programme Director, Local Care Partnership

“Bringing all these people [Community Connectors] together for the event at The One Community Centre felt good – a real show of strength and demonstration that “ordinary people” have a lot to give, and will give it, with a little bit of support and encouragement. For me the biggest impact from the Pathfinder sites has been the broader increase in awareness in Leeds about ABCD, Community Power and Strength based approaches [...] It feels like there are less barriers put up than there used to be – still a long way to go though” Ian Kenning, Localities Manager, Housing & Environment

This awareness has fostered a more collaborative environment in the neighbourhoods (in the ABCD Pathfinder areas funded) and influenced how the Council works with people, and how they co-design service provision, shifting power to people. One example given by Active Leeds Team in City Development:

“ ABCD is embedded into our Get Set Leeds Local project and is now being embedded into the wider team. It's often not easy (or quick) work, but when it's in action you can see it's fundamentally the right way of working. Having a shared vision as the pathfinders and community builders is really helpful to enhance our collaborative work within our key priority communities.

Karen Peck, Active Leeds, Development Officer

Social Return on Investment analysis

Working with Leeds Beckett University we conducted a second Social Return on Investment (SROI) study of the six ABCD Pathfinders sites to see if there had been any change to the initial SROI study in 2019-2021 that showed up to £14.02 of social return for every £1 invested. This analysis was conducted by Anne-Marie Bagnall, Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Beckett University.

The New Economics Foundation¹⁸: A guide to Social Return on Investment describes the principles as follows:

“Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a framework for measuring and accounting for this much broader concept of value; it seeks to reduce inequality and environmental degradation and improve wellbeing by incorporating social, environmental, and economic costs and benefits. SROI measures change in ways that are relevant to the people or organisations that experience or contribute to it. It tells the story of how change is being created by measuring social, environmental, and economic outcomes and uses monetary values to represent them.

This enables a ratio of benefits to costs to be calculated. For example, a ratio of 3:1 indicates that an investment of £1 delivers £3 of social value. SROI is about value, rather than money. Money is simply a common unit and as such is a useful and widely accepted way of conveying value. In the same way that a business plan contains much more information than the financial projections, SROI is much more than just a number. It is a story about change, on which to base decisions, which includes case studies and qualitative, quantitative, and financial information.”

¹⁸ <https://neweconomics.org/2009/05/guide-social-return-investment>



Volunteers

The six ABCD pathfinder sites included in this analysis were: Better Action for Families (BAFF), Beeston; HCAP, Horsforth; LS14 Trust, Seacroft; OPAL, Cookridge; St Lukes Cares, Beeston Hill; Touchstone, Lincoln Green.

We used data available (2022-2024) from the monitoring of outcomes through the common evaluation framework:

- Number of Community Connectors Identified.
- Number of people who say they have made a new friend.
- Decisions made to change something in an area e.g. changes to a park, social activities, micro-economic business.

Financial proxies for social values were found using the global value exchange tool¹. We made the assumption that on average each Community Connector contributes a minimum of 2 hours per week. We calculated what this represents in terms of paid work using the national minimum wage. We used the number of Small Sparks awarded in each site, as a proxy for changes made, and assumed that on average five people were involved in each activity.

We made the following adjustments: 50% drop-off for Community Connector retention; 17% deadweight (what proportion of change may have happened anyway); 50% of the benefits were attributed to the projects. A sensitivity analysis considered attribution, deadweight, displacement, and the effect of using higher and lower social values for the outcomes recorded.

The adjusted figure social value returned for each £1 invested has risen from up to £14.02 to up to £36.90 for every pound invested.

Friends of Horsforth Skatepark, Skateboard MOT's



Conclusion

The review has highlighted the immeasurable impact that small pockets of trust-based funding can achieve on a local level. That the smallest actions can create biggest changes to people's lives.

The ABCD Pathfinder sites have proved a catalyst to improving the health and wellbeing of people living there, strengthening social action and the unlocking of 'assets' in those areas.

We have seen that investing small trust-based funding in pockets of neighbourhoods has had a range of significant positive impacts for the people that have been involved. Cross cutting connections between diverse communities have become deeply embedded, creating an immeasurable long-term value: true meaningful friendships. People adapted, collaborated, and created things, together. A sense of pride, fulfilment, and ownership of where they live, and belief in their own power to bring about change.

The impact of ABCD on strengthening social cohesion, community resilience and community infrastructure has helped to build capacity and social capital leading to other initiatives that have supported community development such as the creation of Community Interest Companies and Community Asset Transfer. This ripple effect and the continuation of self-sustaining groups have created a legacy of sustainable community-based activity, which will support prevention and limit the need to access traditional service provision. The value of ABCD Pathfinder sites has been widely acknowledged by partners.

The review has shown us how vital the role of the Community Builder is for people in communities. The place-based knowledge and unique skills of the Community Builders have influenced other Third Sector organisations and institutions in how they might work in the future. It evidences that asset-based principles and values can affect change at an operational level.

There are challenges to balancing values-based reporting; it takes a lot of resource and time to collate and decipher hundreds of conversations, stories and examples to identify find key themes and quantifiable trends or correlations to evidence impacts. Although numbers alone rarely give us rich insights, for many institutions they continue to hold more value than stories.

We will continue to focus our efforts, in open dialogue with our Third Sector partners, and continue to learn and adapt how we record and measure impacts, looking at tools such as ripple effect mapping.

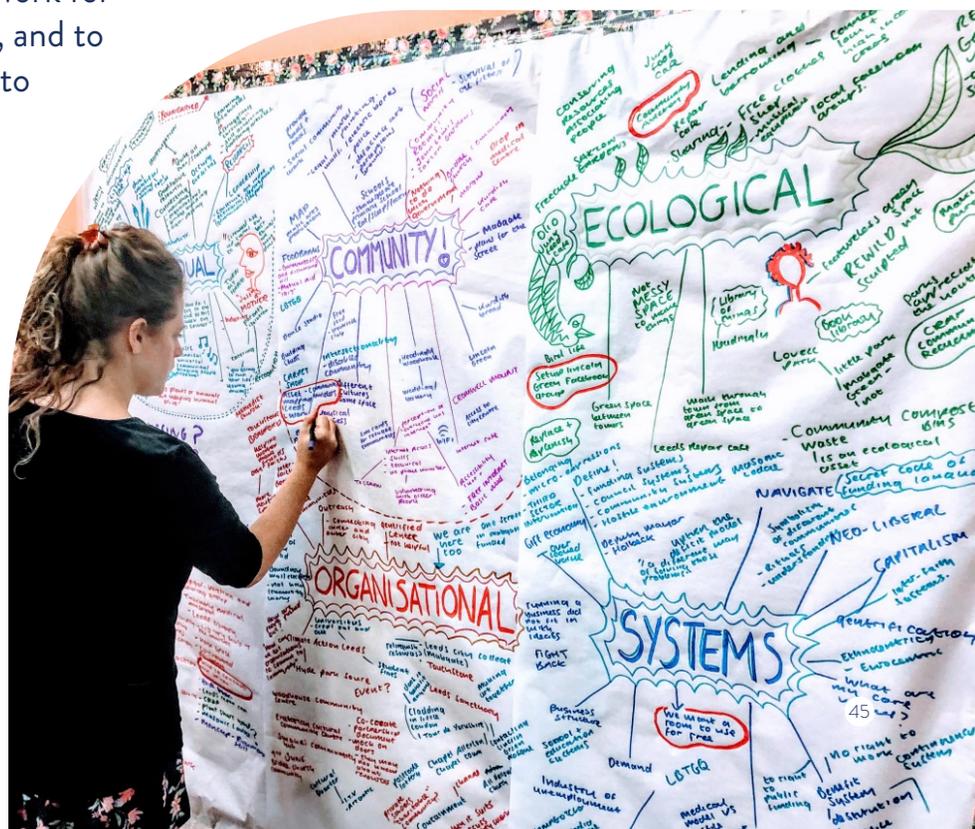
The revised SROI study suggests funding the model of ABCD developed in Leeds is a very cost-effective investment to support prevention, build sustainable community infrastructure and support the wider social determinants of health. From an ethical perspective working in this way is the right thing to do to empower and enrich people's lives.

It is clear from the review and analysis of ABCD Pathfinder grant monitoring that continuing to invest in the ABCD model for 12 years in Leeds has raised the profile of this model and has created a benchmark of good practice.

On reflection it has also been the step change we have made as a Council in how we work with and commission Third Sector organisations, the spirit of self-reflection and openness to adapt and change how we work, how we measure impact. We have continued to invest in the model, created ABCD/Asset-Based training for all Council staff and councillors to clarify the model and our roles to support asset-based working. We have delivered workshops and commissioned ABCD training in the Third Sector, test bedded asset-based approaches integrating asset-based working into other services. Similarly, we have seen a ripple effect of culture change across the Council. We hold a Community Power Network for Council staff to reflect on practice, and to continue to support a culture shift to asset-based working.

This review has reaffirmed our commitment to the proliferation of the ABCD model, and we have concluded that the Leeds ABCD model continues to support ABCD principles and values and delivers meaningful change. The Leeds Ambitions reaffirm the commitment to championing community power and the role of ABCD is understood to be fundamental to delivering that.

We will continue to champion the ABCD model, fostering cross-functional collaboration, investing in capability-building, and maintaining a strong focus on impact that will support the Community Power agenda, shifting power to communities, top to bottom, bottom to top. This work is based on the belief that everyone has a gift, everyone has something to contribute and that people build community.



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The Community Connectors and residents who make up the rich and diverse neighbourhoods and communities across Leeds.

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Special thanks to Anne-Marie Bagnall, Professor of Health and Wellbeing Evidence Director, Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Beckett University who has collaborated with us to conduct a revised SROI study as part of this review.

A review of ABCD in Leeds pathfinder sites (2019 -2025)

A six-year journey from seeds to trees

