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ASSET BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN LEEDS: AN EVALUATION

This summary presents findings from Leeds Beckett University’s evaluation of an Asset Based Community Development programme in Leeds

The Leeds ABCD evaluation was carried out from 2019-21. It gathered information from across the programme on how ABCD worked in local neighbourhoods and what changes happened. Researchers worked closely with community partners and used interviews with Community Builders, community members and professionals involved in ABCD, as well as quarterly reports by Community Builders. This summary explains the main findings from this in-depth research.

What is ABCD?

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is a community building approach based in neighbourhoods. It supports local people to make the changes they want to see in their area. They identify their strengths and what is important to them. They set up local activities on the things that matter to them and connections between each other get stronger.

The approach focuses on what is strong (the skills and positives of the people and the area) and not what is wrong. The goal is to support neighbourhoods to thrive by bringing people together and improving their health and wellbeing. The key is working **with** people and the changes are made **by** them, rather than doing things **to them** or **for them**.

ABCD is the opposite of a ‘deficit’ way of working. A ‘deficit’ approach only focuses on needs and problems and doesn’t try to understand all the strengths in communities that can support people to live fulfilling lives. To uncover the strengths a community has, the Community Builders worked with residents to identify physical, social and individual assets in their area. This process is called ‘asset mapping’.

What are Assets?

Physical assets – include cafes, schools, libraries, pubs, green spaces, community centres, allotments, shops.

Social assets – include community groups or organisations, friendship groups, informal networks e.g. street WhatsApp groups.

Individual assets - individuals and their skills were thought by some Community Builders to be the “No. 1” asset.

How does ABCD work in Leeds?

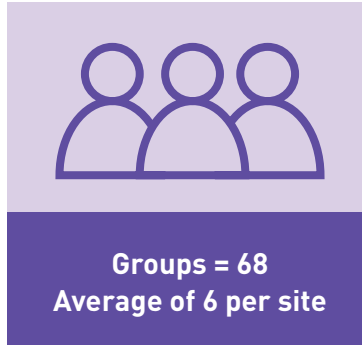
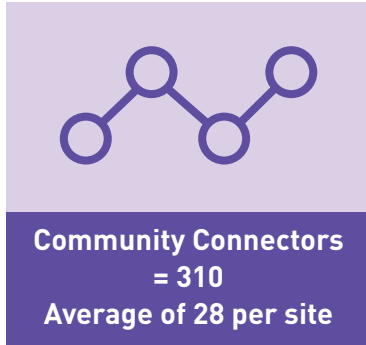
Leeds City Council (LCC) established the ABCD model with 3 third sector organisations in 2017, expanding to 12 sites in 2019. Each site has a **Community Builder (CB)** who is a paid worker hosted by a local community organisation. The Community Builders find ‘**Community Connectors**’ - people who are active in community life and bring others together. Leeds City Council coordinates the Community Builder Network that provides peer support for Community Builders. ‘**Small Sparks**’ grants are available to community groups to help them kickstart their ideas.

The sites across Leeds vary in size, types of housing, and who lives there. Some neighbourhoods are doing well and have community spaces to gather in. Others are struggling and many shops, pubs and cafes have closed down.

Community Builders got to know local services (e.g. schools, GPs, libraries, police); religious groups or places; local businesses; community groups; sporting groups; social groups; local political institutions/employees; and charities. They did this by walking around the neighbourhood, taking photographs, having conversations with people, and doing internet searches about the area. This asset mapping process helped Community Builders get to know the neighbourhoods and the people. This needs to be an ongoing process because communities are always changing.

As Community Builders got to know what communities wanted to do, they connected people and organisations. They helped local people set up new groups and supported groups that were already there.

Over the 18 months of the evaluation



WHAT DID THE EVALUATION FIND?

The evaluation looked at whether the Leeds ABCD programme led to changes in the community. It found evidence on positive changes (outcomes) linked to what ABCD was trying to do – these outcomes were that people made new friends, became more connected and took action to make their neighbourhood a better place. There was strong evidence that ABCD works in different communities and contexts.

The evaluation found that allowing time to build trust, having a base (e.g. a community centre), local knowledge of the area and people, plus peer support from the Community Builders Network help to develop an ABCD project.

People have good friends

There was strong evidence that people had better social connections through ABCD and promising evidence that friendships were being made, from laying foundations through to meaningful relationships. This outcome was important to people. Community members told us that social connections and relationships are at the heart of enabling communities to agree what matters most to them and to make changes:

“If we didn’t have the social element then nothing else would work would it so it’s the social element that starts it all off.”
[Resident]

The research found that bringing together people with shared interests or challenges helped friendships to develop e.g. young dads or people with a love of crochet. Community Builders gave people the confidence to speak to others. Many then keep in contact outside of the project and build on initial connections.

“One man said he often saw the same faces as he went to or returned from his work shifts. Although he recognised them, he did not know them [...] he made a decision to greet them as he passed and reported back that it had brought positive results – smiles, nods, and a return ‘hello’. He felt pleased with this outcome and was animated when he recounted it.”
[Community Builder]

Signs of friendships growing due to the ABCD project include light-hearted jokes and chats, and support through difficult situations. People told us that significant social relationships were built through being involved in ABCD groups and activities and this led to improved mental health, and increased confidence and independence.

Individuals and organisations are better connected

The evaluation found that ABCD in Leeds has helped people to discover their own talents and skills through connecting them with others socially. These connections and activities lead to a range of benefits for residents. Residents told us these include having an incentive to go out and do new things, having “something to look forward to” and creating a sense of belonging. The project has encouraged community members to make use of social spaces, such as parks, libraries, and community rooms in blocks of flats, to meet others and start conversations.

There was strong evidence that ABCD strengthened local groups and new community activities. The evaluation found that for networks and community spirit to grow, bringing people together around shared interests and/or circumstances is important, and can lead to long-lasting relationships.

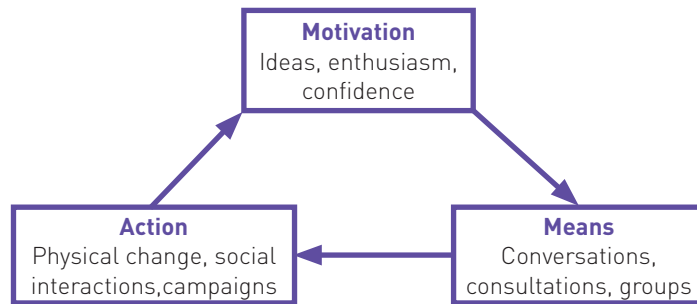
“When people can be organically brought together who have common interests, they create networks that are empathic and genuine, which in turn creates more sustainable community connectivity.”
[Community Builder]

Community Builders signpost people to activities, training, support, welfare, and services. They help promote connections between generations and build bridges between people who haven’t got along in the past.

Partnerships grew with GP surgeries, local businesses, schools, Leeds City Council and NHS services, as well as other third sector organisations. There have also been connections with organisations across the UK and overseas as the news of the work spread.

Communities identify and work together to bring about the changes they want to see

Community Builders provide encouragement and advice to motivate residents and the programme offers ways to connect residents into wider discussions. The evaluation found that with the ideas, people and processes in place, new and existing groups, and individual community members can take action to bring about change. When people begin to take action and make changes, they feel more positive, leading to more new ideas and enthusiasm. These evaluation findings provide strong evidence for the pathway to community change with clear links between early asset-based conversations and later community action:



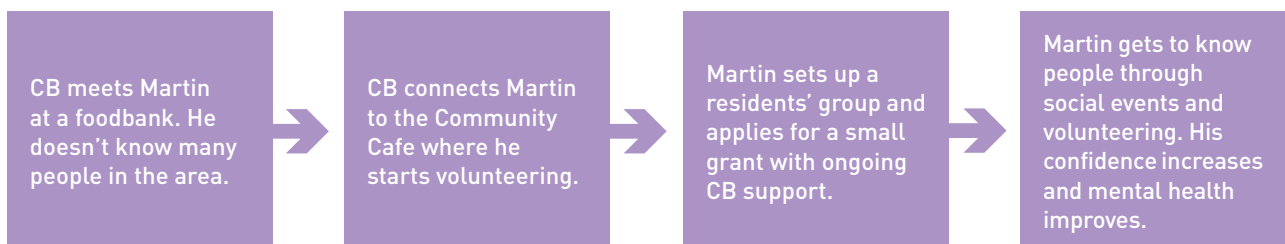
There was promising evidence on changes in communities; people shared examples of changes in their area such as improved public spaces.

Additional outcomes

The evaluation planned to look at ABCD’s effect on friendships, connections and how communities bring about change, but also found many other positive effects of the programme. The three other most important changes were:

- Changes in the mindset of residents and workers. Community members started to change how they thought and took control of projects and spaces. Workers no longer tried to deliver everything themselves, so they could use their time and skills to support others to run more groups and projects.
- Influence on the host and other organisations to use ABCD more widely. Community Builders acted as ABCD champions spreading the word in their area.
- Improved health and wellbeing of residents because people increased in confidence and interacted more through being involved and accessing services. The project also offered ways of keeping people mentally active if they were retired or not working.

Martin’s story – an example of the difference the ABCD project made to one person in Leeds.





Key learning and what's next

The evaluation included interviews with professionals working at Leeds City Council and other public or voluntary organisations. The people interviewed described how ABCD allowed communities to do things for themselves which reduced bureaucracy and increased the quantity and quality of activities offered. From the professionals' perspective, this approach is more cost effective, but ABCD is about more than that – it aims to give communities more control:

"ABCD never said you don't need services but what it says is first and foremost start with your community and your neighbours, then look at what you can do via the social sector and only then look at what you need a formal service to do".
[Senior manager]

Professionals told us that to make ABCD work, organisations need:

- Buy-in from leadership
- Courage to look at creative ways of working
- Trust in employees to take decisions
- A structure to follow

There is initial evidence on how to achieve sustainability, for example, consideration could be given to having Community Builders in more areas and using the approach in existing roles and structures (e.g. in libraries or social prescribing programmes). It is important not to lose the local, grassroots nature of ABCD when thinking about 'scaling up'. Whilst it is relatively early in the programme's development, professionals involved are positive about sharing the model.

A city-wide approach to developing ABCD is possible but neighbourhood context matters. It takes time for ABCD to become part of the way people work. The 'magic ingredient' is developing trusting relationships between workers, organisations and the community.

Partnership information

This collaborative evaluation was commissioned by Leeds City Council to evaluate the Leeds ABCD programme. The research team from the Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Beckett University worked with the Leeds City Council ABCD team and the network of Community Builders to design and carry out an in-depth evaluation from 2019-21.

The Centre for Health Promotion Research is one of the leading UK research centres engaged in advancing the evidence base for health promotion locally, nationally and internationally. There is a strong focus on community-based and participatory research, working with communities and organisations that seek to reduce health and social inequalities. Our current portfolio includes research on community wellbeing, volunteering and health assets.

How strong is the evidence? [Adapted from What Works Wellbeing (Snape et al., 2019)]

STRONG – we can be confident that the evidence can be used to inform decisions.

PROMISING - we have moderate confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.

INITIAL - we have low confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.

Evidence can be QUANTITATIVE or QUALITATIVE

For more information contact:

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Leeds City Council Asset Based Community Development team: abcd@leeds.gov.uk

References to full reports and other summaries:

- Full Evaluation Report <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7640/>
- Full Evidence Report <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7641/>
- Evaluation Summary <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7763/>
- Evidence Summary <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7764/>
- Covid-19 Response Summary <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7765/>
- SROI Summary <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7766/>

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