

Asset-Based Community Development for Local Authorities

How to rebuild relationships with communities through asset-based approaches



About Nesta

Nesta is an innovation foundation. For us, innovation means turning bold ideas into reality and changing lives for the better. We use our expertise, skills and funding in areas where there are big challenges facing society. Nesta is based in the UK and supported by a financial endowment. We work with partners around the globe to bring bold ideas to life to change the world for good.

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About the New Operating Models Handbook

'Asset-Based Community Development for Local Authorities' is part of the New Operating Models Handbook, a set of learning products which explore the new operating models emerging in local government – how they work, what they look like and the key features needed to promote success elsewhere. It draws on the experience of the twenty pioneering Local Authorities participating in the Upstream Collaborative, which was led by Nesta in partnership with Collaborate from 2019 to 2020. The Handbook is made up of six parts:

Introducing New Operating Models for Local Government

From the Margins to the Mainstream:

How to create the conditions for new operating models to thrive

Reframing Risk:

How to adopt new mindsets around risk that enable innovation

Asset-Based Community Development for Local Authorities:

How to rebuild relationships with communities through asset-based approaches

Meaningful Measurement:

How a new mindset around measurement can support a culture of continual learning – notes from the field

A Catalyst for Change:

What COVID-19 has taught us about the future of local government

Contents

00. Introduction	7
01. What is asset-based community development?	10
02. Asset-based community development: the benefits to Local Authorities	19
03. Putting it into practice: how to adopt asset-based community development	24
04. Final thoughts	40
05. Contacts	41
06. Further Reading	42
07. Acknowledgements	43
08. Endnotes	44

“No society has the money to buy, at market prices, what it takes to raise children, make a neighbourhood safe, care for the elderly, make democracy work or address systemic injustices...

The only way the world is going to address social problems is by enlisting the very people who are now classified as ‘clients’ and ‘consumers’ and converting them into co-workers, partners and rebuilders.”

Edgar Cahn¹



00. Introduction

Asset-based community development changes the relationship between a local authority, its citizens, and communities by focusing on *'what's strong, not what's wrong'*.

Over the last decade, local authorities have been grappling with the triple challenge of ever-increasing complexity, growing demand for services, and continuing reductions in resources. Many report having worked on the same problems in the same way for many years and are frustrated to see how little has changed. They recognise that the people they serve are complex, with individual contexts and needs, and that the issues they face can't be resolved by a single, simple service model. There is recognition that over-professionalisation and the 'customer' management approach from previous decades not only leaves them ill-equipped to meet the challenges communities face, but can be wasteful and even harmful.

Councils have therefore responded with a renewed vision of their role, demonstrated through the adoption of more person- and community-centred approaches. The seven local authorities behind this guide have all seen that connected, caring communities are central to finding more effective ways to help people live well and solve problems together. They believe that given the tools and the opportunity, **local people can change the things they believe need changing in their community better than anyone else.**

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is an established and well-documented approach that a number of local authorities have adopted to build more effective relationships with communities, meeting a broad range of target outcomes for a relatively low level of investment. However, each of the contributors to this guide has adopted and adapted ABCD in the way that best fits with their context – they are at different stages and have made changes to suit their area, resources, and communities.

We believe that their experience can benefit other local authorities adopt asset-based community development, helping to embed and proliferate its use within local government. And while much more is still to be learned about its impact, these experiences also indicate that ABCD will contribute to the building of healthier, safer, more prosperous and inclusive places that are led by their citizens.

A renewed relationship

Many local authorities have been reviewing their relationship with citizens, responding to both a crisis in representative democracy and communities disaffected with power. ABCD provides a route to a better relationship, starting a new conversation with the citizens that councils serve.

Cormac Russell's book [Rekindling Democracy](#)² refers to 'building community and pathways to citizenship' to speak directly to the role of local authorities in facing up to societal challenges. ABCD advocates recognise that both the solutions to these challenges and the capacity to overcome them are already there to be built on and connected with.

This guide

This guide lays out the key steps in implementing ABCD, illustrated by real stories that show how the approach can be adapted to suit different contexts and create change within communities.

These experiences demonstrate how a new operating model for local government can be brought to life through practical action. With a mindset that frames communities as a source of rich abundance comes the ability to put ABCD principles into practice by building the right supporting infrastructure and capabilities.

For some of the councils represented in the working group, the drive towards an asset-based approach has come from elected members; for some it's baked into the corporate plan; and for others it's been championed by particular directorates. All have been able to embed and expand their activities further as the benefits become apparent and are made visible through formal evaluations and publicly shared stories.

“Communities have never been built upon their deficiencies. Building communities has always depended on mobilising the capacity and assets of people and place.”

John Kretzmann & John McKnight³



01.

What is asset-based community development?

Community development is a relatively young profession in the UK that emerged from three much older traditions – informal self-help and solidarity, mutual aid, and philanthropy. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, practices such as community organising and community development drew on this heritage, evolving within the context of local government practice.

In the late 1980s, researchers John Kretzmann and John McKnight introduced a set of ideas that challenged the conventional wisdom of community development. Over a four year period, the pair visited over 300 neighbourhoods in twenty North American cities – and found that despite the hardships they face, many low income communities can and do become stronger and prosper.

Traditional approaches may have viewed these communities as *'needy, problematic and deficient neighborhoods populated by needy, problematic and deficient people'*. But Kretzmann and McKnight saw that communities have many assets: a sense of solidarity or neighbourliness, a proliferation of community groups, or the knowledge and passions of local people.

In 1993 they published their findings in a book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*, setting out the principles and practices of asset-based approaches in what is now considered to be a foundational work.

In the UK, the approach has been championed by thought leaders such as Cormac Russell of Nurture Development, with a growing group of advocates working in local authority settings.

“ There are things that only a community can do, that they're uniquely competent to do. There are also things that only government can only do... It's really important that government doesn't do what the community can do, but where a community needs help – help them. And where a community needs the government to do its job, get on and do it. What we're actually seeing is decades of the net result of government doing stuff that communities can do best. So they've grown rusty.⁴

Cormac Russell, Nurture Development

Mick Ward of Leeds City Council (recently retired), has written an excellent introduction to the way in which he and his team have understood the ABCD approach:

"Asset-based community development and asset-based approaches begin by finding out what the people living in a community care enough about to work on together to change, develop and/or sustain," he writes.

"It recognises and celebrates the uniqueness of neighbourhoods and the interdependencies of communities. Central to the approach is finding and recognising the assets of an area; anything from a patch of unused land, a neighbour who knows the local baby groups, a local business who is happy to share their office space, a fast-food restaurant where young adults meet or a retired teacher looking to meet new people."

"They will be different in every area, but whatever they are these community assets are the building blocks of sustainable community building efforts."

In the words of Russell, asset-based community development is "the way by which we can build healthier, safer, prosperous and more inclusive communities". In a world of complex, interdependent challenges, growing inequalities and a continuing struggle for public funding, the adoption of this approach has become all the more necessary.

Fundamentally, local authorities unlock new ideas and resources when they recognise communities as contributors and a source of rich abundance, rather than recipients of rationed services and pockets of demand.

“*Only by adopting asset-based approaches will we be able to reframe the relationship between citizens and state and help citizens and communities do more for themselves.*

Anne Brinkhoff, Gloucester

ABCD Principles

The implementation of asset-based approaches requires the adoption of a set of principles that enable a shift in power, with people's "skills, gifts, talents and networks... being harnessed to provide self-sustaining solutions and a deep reservoir of community resources that people can draw upon to live well" as one [article](#)⁵ from the Local Area Coordination Network puts it.

Contrasting deficit and asset-based approaches can help understand these ABCD principles more fully, as this table adapted from the [Glass Half Full report](#)⁶ shows:

From... Deficit approach	To... Asset-based approach
Focus on problems, deficits or weakness; focus on past failures	Focus on opportunities and strengths; focus on future possibilities and successes
Local people as 'customers', 'clients' or 'service users'	Local people as 'citizens'
Provide services to people	Develop and co-produce services <i>with</i> people
Responds to 'problems'	Finds opportunities for growth and social change, gives people ownership of their experiences
Reliance on outside 'experts' and bureaucratic systems	Non-bureaucratic, focus on people's strength and knowledge, prioritises community
Grants or funding given to agencies or government	Grants or funding given to local associations or groups
Programmes are the answer	<i>People</i> are the answer

Figure 1: ABCD principles



Key concepts

Asset-based approaches can take many forms, and are best thought of as a spectrum of options rather than a strict set of rules. This is partly determined by what a local area needs, and what a local authority is able to offer – ABCD is inherently place-based, responding to an individual community and its geography, resources, strengths and talents.

“ *We're always asking – how are we being led by communities? What is important to them? How is this creating opportunities for people to build connections and friendships? If needed, how do I build more formal support around those things?*

Lisa Keenan, Leeds City Council

There are, however, some core components that tend to be replicated, though they might carry different labels within different authorities:

- **Local partnerships:** ABCD is not something that councils do alone. Rather, it's about playing a part within an ecosystem, working with partners with similar principles or desired outcomes. This could include other directorates within the local authority, VCSE organisations, the constabulary, as well as local groups and residents.
- **Community Builders:** a person within an existing, trusted organisation that is based and operates at a neighbourhood level.
- **Community Connectors:** local people with a gift or passion they are encouraged to use/share.
- **Asset mapping:** a collective process that creates an inventory of local assets and strengths.
- **Small sparks funding:** micro-grants awarded to communities and individuals to create projects that benefit the whole area.

Insight from experience | Leeds



"We have seen real value in the Community Builder post – somebody walking the streets, meeting people, hearing what they care about. The importance of that role with no other agenda has been incredible. They will introduce people to someone with similar interests and off they go. Others have had much more transformative experiences, where their confidence has increased and they have wanted to move into formal volunteering and later paid employment."

"We have seen people reduce their reliance on formal services, organise litter picks, grow vegetables on unused land, bring families together in parks to support each other – all things that contribute to the council's objectives – but achieved by Community Builders starting where people are and walking alongside them when needed."

Place-based customisations

Alongside the core components, there are customisations which support goals or strategies specific to particular places, helping connect communities and individuals to services in a strengths based way.

- **Local Area Coordination:** York uses a Local Area Coordination model, in which Coordinators work within defined neighbourhoods to connect with and support people to build a vision of a 'good life', find solutions to potential or existing problems, and draw on individual and community resources before considering the option of referring into commissioned or statutory services.
- **Hubs:** Some local authorities have identified the opportunity to provide places in which communities can meet and connect. Redbridge is in the process of creating six community hubs to bring together council services, community groups and partner agencies. What the hubs will actually do is a question for communities – each individual location will be designed with local people.
- **Social Prescribing:** In Oldham, a consortia of voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise partners works together with the local health and care ecosystem to connect people who have 'more than medical' needs with a local connector, who spends time with them exploring what activities or local support could improve their health and wellbeing.
- **Independent company formation:** Gloucester chose to incorporate a Community Interest Company (CIC) and manage ABCD activity through that.

Spotlight on Gloucester



In Gloucester, which adopted the ABCD approach in 2012, Community Builders “talk to people in communities and uncover their passions and skills”. They ask citizens what they are good at, what they like doing and what they would like to do more of in their community, and then work on connecting people with similar thoughts, ideas and interests.

In short, Community Builders make connections and put local people in touch with each other, instigate and facilitate: they may help organise resources but never organise for people. Community builders have enabled a plethora of projects and events – from large street parties attracting thousands of residents to supporting one elderly lady knock on her neighbours’ doors to set up a weekly coffee morning.

In December 2018, Gloucester approved the creation of an independent organisation to provide a neutral platform for community building activities removed from the particular (and often deficit-based) purposes of any individual organisation: it was felt that this would achieve a wider buy-in from communities and the range of partner organisations, ensuring a longer-term success and growth of community building across the city.

It took 12 months to establish the [Gloucester Community Building Collective](#)⁸, which at time of writing includes a team of six Community Builders supported by an Executive Director: a further three PCSOs also work as part of the team.

The team is funded through a blend of secondments (from Gloucestershire County Council Adult Social Care), strategic funding through the City Council and the CCG and commissioning partners such as Active Gloucestershire (the local Sports Partnership).

A note on language

Language reflects – and reinforces – the values underpinning the work.

Asset-based approaches purposefully change language to reflect the key values inherent to the work. “Service users” or “customers” become “citizens”, mirroring the move away from the transactional model and towards something more collaborative. In many cases, traditional terms fail to make sense in the new context: for people involved in a regular fish and chip supper organised by groups supported by the council in Leeds, for example, the term ‘service user’ just doesn’t reflect what’s actually going on.

“ *Setting the programme up has been about recruiting the right set of people with the right values, but also about using language to articulate what we’re trying to create: a more caring, compassionate and connected society and city.* ”

Joe Micheli, City of York Council

People can also feel unfairly marginalised or labelled by certain terms, leaving them disempowered and reticent about engaging with certain services or projects. Someone who has been labelled as ‘mentally ill’, for example, may not want to join a group specifically geared towards ‘mental health’, but might instead join in with groups based on a common interest. Removing the label can therefore result in greater inclusion, better social and peer support, and ultimately better mental health outcomes.

Finally, language can help bring others on board who may not yet understand or be sold on ABCD values. A reflection from many practitioners is that changing language can help colleagues better understand asset-based approaches. Careful use of language can therefore be a useful persuasive tool.

“It’s a further shift to looking at how we keep people well rather than waiting for people to need services. It puts people at the centre, allowing communities to lead and public services to respond when they’re needed.

The current way of fitting people into programmes and services is not working for everybody and can be costly. By supporting people to build on their strengths and make new connections their resilience increases and dependence on services decreases. It’s the right thing to do and it costs less.”

Lisa Keenan, Leeds City Council



02.

Asset-based community development: the benefits to local authorities

The communities we live in and the relationships we have are the primary source of our physical and mental health – which in turn affects the kind of life we are able to live and what part we can play in society. By investing in communities, local authorities can focus on cultivating the conditions for people to flourish – and, over time, reduce the demand for services at the point of crisis.

By their very nature, asset-based approaches can clash with evaluation methodologies that start with deficits. This means that, in many ways, the evidence base for such approaches is underdeveloped. But the local authorities behind this guide have found clear benefits to their work – and though many of these projects started with a health and wellbeing objective, the benefits range well beyond that.

Connecting people and creating more resident-to-resident relationships builds interdependence and reliance on each other within the community; connecting people to their shared interests and enabling them to exchange skills and resources helps communities identify and take action on the issues that are most important to them.

The examples below illustrate just some of the areas Leeds have seen this in action:

- **Community cohesion and community safety:** The more people that know their neighbours and the more collectively a community behaves, the safer it becomes. For example, a migrant community supporting older and disabled people by providing simple repairs in return for conversational English helps overcome cultural barriers and fear of 'the other'.
- **Local environment:** There is often a strong desire to look after one's own area, reflected in people coming together to establish walking and litter-picking groups and the ambitions of one local community to work together to rejuvenate their local park.
- **Education:** A number of Community Connectors have used their gifts to help with education including art therapy classes, English as a foreign language and Arabic lessons. One local woman is teaching Makaton to other parents to aid communication with people with learning difficulties.
- **Family life:** In one area of Leeds, local people prioritised play equipment, which now provides them with a place to meet and support each other.
- **Food:** People naturally come together around food – from shared pub lunches for older people to projects bringing communities together to eat well to a community-run market stall.
- **Local economy:** Enterprise is stimulated as individuals and small groups discover and harness new skills and resources that can then be further invested in. Some Community Connectors use their engagement in a local activity as a springboard into employment.
- **Health and wellbeing:** In one area of Leeds a Community Builder joined existing mental health groups, resulting in several people identifying their talents and interests. One is running a coffee morning, one took over the community Facebook page, another started volunteering on reception and one now leads the Urban Task Force. Others work on outdoor maintenance, booking days out for the group or running book clubs.

These examples, and many others, are helping to make the case for investment in further Community Builders across the city.

Coronavirus and ABCD



The local authorities behind this guide strongly believe that their investment in ABCD has created the conditions for an effective community-led crisis response to COVID-19. This is consistent with Nesta's wider research⁹ into the response of local authorities to COVID-19, which has found that councils that built strong relationships with their communities and partners had laid the groundwork necessary for a strong community-led and collaborative response. This should be noted by those working to develop the resilience of their local areas.

In Gloucestershire, the city of Gloucester tends to be thought of as more "disadvantaged" than neighbouring Cheltenham. The expectation was that there would be a greater need for council support in Gloucester – but that didn't happen.

Anne Brinkhoff of Gloucester City Council believes that the established ABCD infrastructure was instrumental in setting up a fast and effective local response. Here she tells the story of how elected members and community leaders mobilised a network of over 500 street champions who other residents could contact for help.

"We had to put in place a system that could enable these Community and Street Champions to access essential supplies swiftly. Thanks to the Cabinet Member and local business leaders a food consortium was formed, which repurposed an entertainment venue into a food warehouse. This acted as a central collection and distribution point for food parcels.

Requests for food received through Street Champions or the County Council's Help Hub were triaged with options for free food parcels or paid packages. Other organisations including the Long Table, Fair Shares, Feed the Hungry and many more also offered pre-prepared meals, providing an essential lifeline for those shielding or self-isolating.



Throughout the pandemic we have been constantly reminded of how much people have needed each other. The fastest and most agile support has come from the community, with neighbours and groups working together. The council itself hasn't assumed it has the answers, but rather listened to community members about what works and supported them to implement local solutions. The situation has shown us the essential role that communities and local organisations play in our city – not just in times of crisis, but more importantly through the process of building relationships before they are needed.

We believe that our investment in an asset-based approach over the last couple of years is why we're seeing far fewer formal requests for help. A lot of it is already there, things have been dealt with locally, organically, quickly... it has absolutely demonstrated the strength of the case for this way of working, and I think our response through Street Champions, community groups and our Community Builders has been fantastic."

Neighbourhood stories highlight the potential for scale

In Leeds, the team worked hard to ensure that the importance of neighbourliness was promoted despite the rush to meet increased need. This was reflected through the city-wide volunteering scheme, and it was quickly recognised that this, working alongside ABCD, should be the starting point for any support where possible.

Mick Ward notes that the increased neighbourliness and activity of mutual aid groups has led to a "broader understanding of the potential of ABCD". Communities have been sharing food, doing shopping for one another, organising street-wide socially distant keep fit sessions and more. The council has then shared these stories on blogs, social media and weekly newsletters.

"It has really stimulated interest, and given those of us involved more confidence in pushing the agenda further."

York's Joe Micheli agrees: "COVID-19 from our perspective hasn't meant a massive change, because we already have a vision and desire to work in a manner that reflects ABCD principles."

Mutual aid groups have simply "enhanced what we were already planning to do... and maybe supported some of our colleagues to work in a way that's more reflective of that model than they would have done previously."

"Councils need to recognise the power of the citizen and neighbourhood as cornerstones for a future society that is more 'connected, compassionate and caring' – where relationships and community building are the future."

Joe Micheli, City of York Council



03.

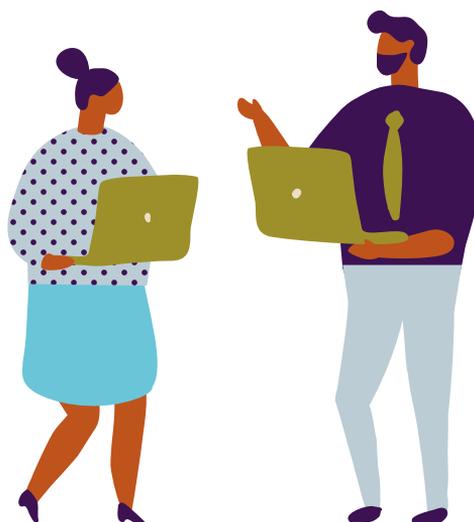
Putting it into practice: how to adopt Asset-based community development

Vision: Alignment with corporate policy

Embedding and scaling an ABCD approach is facilitated where there is clear alignment with the corporate priorities of a council plan.

In 2016 City of York Council, led by Adult Social Care, introduced a new '[community operating model](#)'¹⁰ as an enabler of the council wide vision of supporting people to enjoy healthy, active and independent lives. It is based on giving people in York control over how they manage their social care needs, with a strong emphasis on the use of personal and community assets and working in partnership using the principles of co-production.

A strong voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) is key to delivering this agenda, and builds on the council's corporate plan and key strategic objective of a "prosperous city for all" where local business thrives.



Leadership

To truly embed ABCD into the local authority operating model requires strong leadership from chief officers and cabinet members, based on the adoption of a mindset that frames communities as a source of rich abundance. From this starting point, asset-based practice can be woven into the fabric of the organisation, including job profiles, recruitment, performance monitoring and service planning.

The workgroup has identified the specific leadership qualities that have enabled the leaders and managers within their organisations, including:

- **Bravery:** an ability to hold their nerve and not to move to judgement about potential outcomes and obstacles too quickly is a critical quality for ensuring the longevity of the partnerships.
- A **willingness to be maverick**, combined with discernment about which organisational or practice rules can be 'broken' or at least challenged, make cross-sector partnerships and ongoing collaboration possible.
- Being prepared to **stand up for doing the right thing** because they know it is the right thing.
- Being **consistent in communicating and applying the values** fundamental to the successful application of asset-based practices.

And to enable the conditions for collaborative cross-sector practice-based projects within each organisation you should:

- **Find organisational allies:** put time into identifying like-minded people with a similar energy for the changes you are trying to encourage within your organisation, and develop a relationship with them.
- **Recruit people** with the right skills for collaboration, both within and outside the organisation's sector.

It is important for leaders and change-makers to recognise that some communities and proponents of asset-based thinking are sceptical of the ability of local authorities to behave in a genuinely asset-based way, and there are concerns that the language could be selectively appropriated to justify reductions in traditional services. The adoption of ABCD must therefore be genuine and mindful of previous power relationships.

 *Asset-based approaches require a significant investment of time and resources, and whilst they may result in reduced demand for state services they cannot be introduced successfully with that aim. Whilst it is vital that decision makers buy-in to asset-based thinking, ultimately it will be the buy-in and leadership of local people upon which success depends."*

Briefing Document: [The Asset-Based Area](#)¹¹

Getting started – test and learn

Taking a test and learn approach is key – prototyping in specific areas rather than attempting an immediate, large-scale introduction. This is reflected in the experiences of **Leeds**, who benefited from having the dedicated resource necessary to test ideas, review, learn and adapt.

Leeds established three ABCD pilot sites (known as pathfinders) between 2013-15 to test asset-based approaches across the city and through other directorates, community organisations and NHS partners. Within these sites, **Community Builders** employed by host community organisations were tasked to identify, enthuse and support Community Connectors, local people with a gift or passion they are encouraged to use or share.

Together, they developed locally owned asset maps, identified the changes they wanted to see and used **'small sparks'** funding to encourage local activity. They helped citizens create their own groups, and supported them as they drew upon local and individual resources.

This framework enabled a way of working that gave space to the strengths and differences of each neighbourhood. And taking an iterative approach enabled the team to collectively identify the outcomes that all of their ABCD work should contribute to. Now, any newly commissioned sites specify these outcomes and use the same framework.

Small Sparks success story



The Migrant Access Project¹² (MAP), a project set up to provide information about systems and services to new migrant communities, was one of the successes that enabled the expansion of the ABCD approach in Leeds.

Individuals were recruited from the migrant community to become Community Builders, and were trained in how to navigate the health and social care system, identified their community's strengths and assets, and worked on connecting people to what they needed.

The goal was to encourage people to set up their own groups – and it worked. Over forty groups resulted from the project, from Afghan mother and baby groups to a Syrian kitchen to peer advocacy, and MAP has now been commissioned to work with the council itself.



Insights from experience | Leeds



It is from these pathfinder sites that we have gained the most learning, seeing the potential of the approach and how we could transform services using elements of ABCD – by connecting people around their interests, not their impairment, or supporting people to be part of their community rather than driving them to a formal recreational service.

We learnt as much from what went wrong as what worked. Nothing happens at first, but that's okay – hold your nerve, don't rush to fill the space. At first, commissioning something where nothing much happened for the first seven months felt risky, but building trust and connections takes time. Now we feel apprehensive when too much happens too quickly – it leads us to wonder who's leading the work.

It can be hard to describe ABCD, so building as many practical examples as possible is really helpful. Ostensibly it seems simple – increasing connections, being neighbourly – yet as people come together the potential for them to make change is enormous. It then starts to challenge the place and role of public services.

Commissioning and designing ABCD

Community building through ABCD is seen by the workgroup as an "end in itself, rather than a means to an end". This can present a challenge for those used to commissioning outcomes.

But the group advises against investing in ABCD with a fixed idea of the particular kinds of groups or activities that might emerge. Instead, invest in the opportunity to discover, grow, nurture and repair the networks, capabilities and social processes that make thriving, resilient neighbourhoods. People who are better connected to each other will take the actions they see as being important for their communities, but it takes time to see evidence of the creation or repair of social processes.

““ *Community building is not a quick fix or a way of making communities do what commissioners want. It is about creating capabilities rather than managing dependencies.*

Anne Brinkhoff, Gloucester City Council

Insights from experience | Gloucester



If you are just starting to commission community building, commission it in neighbourhoods where there is an existing appetite for community activity. This might include physical assets (such as a community venue), groups or individuals.

You will potentially be able to see how it works sooner than if you commission it in a community where there is little existing energy for making local connections. Then, use the examples from the first community to help demonstrate what is possible to other neighbourhoods.

Community building and fundamental changes in social processes are intertwined, necessitating a longer-term view to investment. If the investment term is too short or there are expectations that a change in social processes will happen quickly, the initial investment in community building can be lost. To mitigate some of these risks, the following approach to commissioning is recommended:

- Choose commissioners or investors who are able to think and act longer-term; bring them into the project as early as possible so they have a vested interest in both the learning and the outcomes of the project.
- Don't underestimate the importance of creating a shared understanding among commissioners and to recognise the different organisational approaches, norms and values in commissioning practices between different public sector partners.
- Recognise the flaws in wanting (or needing) to demonstrate a short-term quantitative return on investment.
- Recognise that people who might appear to be part of the problem (such as particular groups in society who are traditionally 'done to') may also be part of the solution. See the value of 'working with' a broader range of individuals in the knowledge that professionals don't hold all the answers.

Spotlight on Oldham



The pioneering Oldham Social Prescribing Innovation Partnership brings together community organisations and public sector partners including health, local government, police and housing providers to change the way they support residents. Together, they are working to improve health outcomes and wellbeing through adoption of a different mindset.

The partnership has created a shared space where they are encouraged to build stronger referral pathways and encourages more collaboration by removing competing systems, service metrics or targets.

The commissioning model focuses on innovating and iterating the service model: together, partners and residents can co-produce and iterate a service that meets local needs rather than a service being designed and 'fixed' at the outset. With this comes a focus on system learning and improving population outcomes.

The Innovation Partnership has supported more than 600 people with referral routes from across the system – primary care, social care, acute and self-referral. Early indications from cohort case studies are that GP appointments are being reduced and that the new model is helping people live healthier, happier lives, improving outcomes and even entering employment.

Rani's story

Rani is 27 years old, has a one year-old, and is pregnant. She moved to Oldham from India three years ago when she married her husband, who she recently lost.

Rani visited her GP several times about low mood and physical aches and pains; sensing there were more than just medical issues at play, they referred Rani to the Social Prescribing partnership.

Rani is now benefiting from community bereavement support and is taking part in knit-and-natter women's sewing groups and parent and toddler activities, which are helping reduce her social isolation. Rani's next steps are to enrol on a lifelong learning course and explore employment opportunities with Get Oldham Working: the positive change the partnership is continuing to make for people in Oldham.

Spotlight on Leeds



Leeds City Council sees asset-based working as part of a continuum that goes from formal services designed using asset-based principles up to the full ABCD framework. They recognise that a service will have a clear remit to deliver on – one unlikely to have been decided by the community but that can still use the principles of connecting people around their interests. The council works alongside providers to help them build these asset-based approaches into their delivery of services.

There has been a growing interest in this approach from other directorates: in Active Lifestyles, which is reaching more into communities to deliver physical activity, in arts and cultural organisations looking to be more citizen led, or in libraries and library staff becoming community assets and Community Connectors.

Children's services and schools are also interested in how such work can improve children's attainment, creating space for communities to lead on changes that are important to them rather than assuming professionals have all the answers. NHS organisations are looking at how they can apply asset-based approaches within community healthcare services, and there is increasing support for the approach from GP practices.

Crucially, strengths-based social care has also been tested and rolled out across Leeds as the way social workers work alongside people. The interdependence of these two approaches within Adult Social Care has become more apparent and critical over time as the value of strong, resilient communities and individual strengths and assets is increasingly understood across all the work the council does.

Even as this new approach becomes more embedded, it can still be challenging: people need to be supported to work in a strengths-based way. Colleagues have learned that they need to work collaboratively, acknowledge the risks and share them with the organisation.

They have also found they need to work differently with partners. Funding has to be more open-ended as they are paying organisations to work in a particular way rather than for success against fixed outcomes. They have had to learn to accept that they don't know what exactly will happen – and acknowledge that they are learning together with their partners.

Evaluation

Some of the outcomes key to ABCD are notoriously difficult to measure – connection, neighbourliness, or wellbeing. So how do local authorities evaluate progress?

The value of asset-based activities is contingent on what each person involved views as a good personal outcome. It is possible for the person to assess their progress towards their desired outcome, and for practitioners to capture that through conversations to then extrapolate out to understand progress against programme- and population-level outcomes.

To use a simplistic illustration, Rani in Oldham is able to feel her anxiety lift as she engages more with her knit-and-natter group, the GP surgery can see a drop in the number of prescriptions they're issuing for anxiety and the council can see an increase in the number and diversity of active community groups.

 *Evaluating an ABCD process requires a move away from traditional top-down summative and formative evaluation processes that are features of traditional ways of evaluating community initiatives. Instead, an ABCD approach moves towards a developmental and emancipatory learning process.*

4 Essential Elements of an asset-based community development Process, ABCD Institute¹³

In terms of evaluation, there is both a need for accountability in the way local authorities spend their time and use their resources, and a crucial requirement to learn what works, for who and why. Evaluation practices are emerging that enable both to work in parallel. This is a work in progress, evolving as ABCD becomes more embedded in councils.

Leeds City Council, for example, worked with Community Builders and Leeds Beckett University to establish an evaluation framework focusing on three key outcomes, evidenced through a range of indicators:

Outcomes	Indicators include
Individuals and communities are better connected	Community connectors have a thorough knowledge of the area
Communities identify and work to bring about the changes they want to see	Number of groups formed around an interest
People have good friends	Changes that happen are initiated and sustained by local people
	People know their neighbours' names
	Changes to business strategies/ funding agreements
	Number of celebration events

Asset maps, diaries, stories, and organisational work plans are used as data points from which to learn. Researchers also visit areas, talking to people and capturing insight to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of ABCD.

Similarly, an evaluation [report](#)¹⁴ into the collaboration between Gloucester City, Gloucestershire Police and the Barnwood Trust to promote and implement asset-based approaches captured the impact, reach and process of the initiatives for both professionals and local residents.

Quantitative and qualitative data collected over an 18-month period showed evidence that the partnership's community building activity had a positive impact on perceptions of community cohesion, wellbeing, life satisfaction and, more broadly, perceptions of the police and fear of crime. For the professionals engaged in the work, there was a demonstrable uplift in knowledge of communities and job satisfaction.

Telling stories

Storytelling is one of the most important factors in changing behaviour. Stories help public servants understand not only the often messy lives people lead, but also the complex nature of the problems local communities face. Using 'public narrative' techniques¹⁵ to reflect the story of 'self, us and now' helps changemakers inspire others by going beyond the abstract principles and connecting to shared humanity when engaging with people and communities.

As noted in one Upstream Collaborative [blog post](#)¹⁶, storytelling is an important part of the evaluation approach: as meaningful measurement expert Alexis Pala writes, **"every story has a number and every number has a story."**

Gavin's story



Gavin worked with a Local Area Coordinator after a period of depression so severe that he couldn't leave the house or get out of bed. With "time, exercise and positive social interactions", Gavin eventually enrolled as a Community Health Champion and now supports other people going through difficult times.

"Being part of a programme like Community Health Champions allows me to grow as a person whilst having a positive impact on other peoples' lives, and I am constantly seeking out other opportunities to get involved."

Not only does Gavin's story demonstrate the value of the Local Area Coordinator model, it also allows for a complex evaluation methodology. Instead of using predefined outcomes to measure impact, it lets local people identify what's important to *them*. In Redcar & Cleveland, too, evaluation is a combination of storytelling through personal histories and cost-benefit analysis.

Scaling

Some of this will be fairly straightforward – simply having conversations or working in an asset-based way on collaborative projects or in existing relationships. But those local authorities leading the way take a more structured approach, bringing on board key leadership figures to help spread the message further, advocate for the approach and set a mandate for asset-based work going forward.

 *Don't underestimate the degree of change which a move towards ABCD requires – not surprisingly there have been challenges! These include:*

- *"We already do that!"*
- *Making it work for all and recognising where it doesn't*
- *The importance of continuing to fund existing services*
- *Traditional evaluation and reporting*

It's a shift from 'service land' to community activism and good neighbourliness and for some, this is viewed as yet another way of delivering cuts or threatening existing services and roles.

Mick Ward, Leeds City Council¹⁷

Below are some suggestions, based on the way the workgroup is embedding and spreading ABCD principles and practices:

- **Set-up a council wide ABCD steering group** to inform and be informed – share progress across directorates, prompt progress, share ideas and practical support.
- **Bring in members of leadership teams.** Supportive executive leadership can both expedite processes that may be slowed down and set a mandate for further work.
- **Develop 'ABCD champions'** across teams.
- **Create a peer support network** for Community Builders to safely discuss challenges and share learning.
- **Provide training** to other teams to help them understand and implement ABCD. Engage ABCD specialists to explain the approach and teach colleagues how it can be implemented in everyday work – build the training into leadership programmes.

-
- **Establish a practitioner network** to bring together colleagues across the system to support each other, work through challenges as they are presented, and share successes. This helps the system as a whole to learn and understand the potential of the ABCD approach.
 - **Shift positions by changing language:** the conversation you have when you ask "why would we involve local people?" is very different to the conversation you have when you ask "why wouldn't we?"
 - **Form a research partnership with a university** to evaluate the impact of the ABCD approach.
 - **Create and share a detailed financial analysis.**
 - **Use innovative ways to communicate** and share ideas e.g. films, blogs or social media.
 - **Identify what's not working** in current practice. Stop doing things that don't work, and reallocate resources differently to create more opportunities.
 - **Develop an ecosystem** that will support asset-based approaches and help proliferate it across the health and care system.
 - **Utilise national initiatives** such as the [Asset-Based Area](#)¹⁸ framework to scale up the approach systematically across the council and city.

Finance

Local authorities seeking to implement or embed ABCD approaches need to consider the investment required to support the infrastructure that will make the effort effective and sustainable, and enable them to realise the long-term benefits.

 *Don't focus on ABCD as a means to reduce demand and manage cost pressures. It is an end in itself – but one that will lead to cost savings eventually.*

Anne Brinkhoff, Gloucester

Infrastructure varies depending on the scale and ambition of local needs. However, costs might include:

- Dedicated ABCD posts
- Peer support from experienced ABCD practitioners
- Supporting ABCD training or development for partner organisations
- Supporting ABCD practitioners' networks or programmes for leaders or managers such as stewardship circles
- Investing staff, management and evaluation in collaborative projects as 'test and learn' initiatives
- Commissioning partners to evaluate the impact of the work
- Rent or upkeep of physical sites.

The following example from Leeds gives some indication of how their financial set-up has evolved as they've scaled.

	Year One/set-up	Year Two/embedding	Year Three/scaling
Core costs	3 x ABCD pilot sites at £20,000 each.	6 x ABCD pilot sites at £20,000 each.	11 x ABCD pilot sites at £20,000 – £25,000 each (including a small sparks funding pot). Free training and development offer delivered by third sector provider. Available to all organisations working in Leeds at £30,000.
Staffing structure and costs	Existing officer time within the Enterprise Development Team.	Dedicated ABCD officer role created and existing officer time within the Enterprise Development Team supports this work.	Dedicated ABCD officer role created and existing officer time within the Enterprise Development Team supports this work. Evaluation commissioned from Leeds Beckett University.
Key challenges	Moving from doing for citizens to giving them space to lead takes time. Staff want to be useful and demonstrate value, so there is always the temptation to 'put things on' to fill the space.	Measuring impact effectively. Ensuring this approach included everyone, especially those often excluded from community life. Culture change. Making the language of this approach accessible.	Moving asset-based approaches from the margins to mainstream. Moving away from reliance on service based solutions.

04. Final thoughts

As the examples contained in this guide illustrate, asset-based approaches can be put into practice in many different ways, depending on location, context, resources, and communities.

However, there are key threads that weave their way through each local authority's experience of implementing ABCD, as shared below.

Be bold	Indicators include
Be flexible – what works for one area might not work for yours, and it's important to let communities take the lead.	Don't underestimate the scale of culture change. This approach can feel threatening to teams and organisations.
Be brave – don't be afraid to do things differently.	Give careful consideration to how you take people with you.
Share your learning, including what went wrong.	Engage elected members earlier and ensure they benefit from learning and development opportunities at the same time as officers and citizens.
Use people's stories to inspire and influence others.	Without this, members risk being out of touch with change agendas.
Understand that not everything will work – and don't rush to see results.	
With limited resources, go where the energy is and build allies.	
Listen, be generous and have a plan!	

05. Contacts

If you want to find out more, contact details for Upstream Collaborative members are below – feel free to get in touch with any questions.

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06. Further Reading

[Introducing New Operating Models for Local Government](#)¹⁹

A Nesta report on new operating models in local government

[York's ABCD Journey – People Helping People](#)²⁰

York's Joe Micheli outlines the successes and challenges of York's approach

[Which Way Next?](#)²¹

How Local Area Coordination can help build a better future for all beyond the COVID-19 crisis

[The Asset-Based Area](#)²²

Alex Fox, CEO of Shared Lives Plus, describes ten features of an 'asset-based area' necessary for developing strong communities and sustainable public services

[The ABCD Institute](#)²³

Homepage of the ABCD Institute, led by John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann

[ABCD Institute Workbooks](#)²⁴

Practical papers, toolkits and guides from the ABCD Institute

[Nurture Development – blog](#)²⁵

Blog posts from Cormac Russell's Nurture Development, an organisation that supports the proliferation of inclusive, bottom up, community driven change

[A glass half-full: how an asset approach can improve community health and well-being](#)²⁶

A report from the Improvement and Development Agency on asset-based approaches in healthcare

[From what's wrong to what's strong](#)²⁷

Cormac Russell at TEDxExeter

[A guide to community-centred approaches for health and wellbeing](#)²⁸

by Public Health England

A report from PHE outlining the many benefits of the asset-based approach

[What are asset-based approaches to care and support?](#)²⁹

by Ewan King, *The Guardian*

A simple guide to ABCD and its uses in social care

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08.

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