Asset-based community development (ABCD)

Ageing Better in Birmingham aims to create a new movement of community action on ageing and isolation using a grassroots, asset-based approach. By harnessing active citizenship, the programme aims to reduce isolation among people over 50 and to prevent it happening in the future.

A team of Network Enablers work across the city of Birmingham as a whole, as well as in areas with higher risk of isolation (Sparkbrook and Tyburn) and with groups more likely to experience isolation (older LGBT people and carers). Network Enablers take an asset-based approach to encouraging and supporting communities to develop Networks – self-organising groups providing support and activities with the aim of reducing and preventing social isolation. Networks can access up to £2,000 in short-term funding through the Ageing Better Fund.

This briefing provides a short introduction to Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) and draws on learning from the programme for future initiatives seeking to adopt a similar approach.

What is ABCD?

ABCD is a particular approach to sustainable community development[1]. It builds on the assets available within a community and mobilises individuals, associations and institutions to come together to realise and develop their strengths. In contrast to professionalised, service delivery approaches, which tend to focus on the problems, needs and risks of a community, ABCD moves the focus from 'what is wrong with us' to 'what is right with us'. It is based on the belief that even in a community with complex needs, there will also be resources and capacity (assets) that can be used and built on to improve things. ABCD is built on four foundations[2]:

- It focuses on community assets and strengths rather than problems and needs.

- It identifies and mobilises individual and community assets, skills and passions.

- It is community driven – 'building communities from the inside out'.

- It is relationship driven.

There has been growing interest in such community-based approaches to developing social capital, particularly in relation to public health and wellbeing. Guidance from Public Health England indicates the importance of involving and empowering local communities, and particularly disadvantaged groups, for promoting health and wellbeing. They state that participatory approaches can directly address marginalisation and therefore be more effective than professional-led services in reducing inequalities.[3]

Making use of community assets

ABCD approaches often categorise assets into one of five groups: individuals, associations, institutions, physical or place-based assets and connections.

[1] Asset-Based Community Development Institute https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/Pages/default.aspx

[2] https://www.nurturedevelopment.org/asset-based-community-development/ (accessed 06/02/2020)

[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-health-and-wellbeing-community-centred-approaches/health-matters-community-centred-approaches-for-health-and-wellbeing#the-family-of-community-centred-approaches (accessed 03/03/2020)

Taking an ABCD approach means first identifying the assets within a community and then linking them to individuals or groups who have a need or interest in them.[4]

Ageing Better in Birmingham Networks have made use of the full range of community assets:

- Individual active citizens are at the heart of Ageing Better in Birmingham. To date, over 8,500 people have taken part – setting up and running activities, sharing their time and skills and building friendships.

- The programme has supported a wide variety of Networks to engage older people at risk of loneliness and social isolation. Many of these have been developed by established community associations, such as faith groups, social clubs, and neighbourhood associations. New groups have greatly benefitted from the expertise and practical support of larger, more experienced organisations. For example, when a community member wanted to do something to

[4] https://www.nurturedevelopment.org/asset-based-community-development/ (accessed 06/02/2020)

help older people, support from Glebe Farm Trust Community Interest Company helped make this a reality (see boxed case study overleaf).

- Ageing Better in Birmingham has worked closely with local **institutions**, such as schools, care homes, public libraries and local businesses. This has been particularly useful in reaching and bringing together different groups of people. For example, King Edward VI grammar school in Handsworth held an intergenerational day at their school hall and worked with Ageing Better in Birmingham to find older people to invite along.

- **Physical assets**, for example community centres or places of worship, play an important role in providing a place for groups to host activities. Some groups have focused on improving the physical assets of the community. For example, Friends of Sheldon Park brought people together in the park to develop and maintain a community garden. Those involved share the produce they have grown, creating an additional asset.

- Those involved in Ageing Better in Birmingham have made good use of local connections to gain access to the resources and expertise needed to make activities a success. Acocks Green Men's Shed sourced donations of £1,300 from local associations, a local housing maintenance company provided recyclable wood and other materials and the local hardware store has also supported the group by placing leaflets about the group on their counter and providing a trade account discount.

Glebe Farm Trust Community Interest Company

When an active citizen from the Glebe Farm area noticed fewer older people out and about in the area following the closure of the community centre she wanted to do something to help. After a chance meeting with the owner of the local CIC, Community Engagement Services, she agreed to work with him to set up a new group. The CIC used their knowledge and experience to successfully apply for funding and The Glebe Farm Community Group was established. The active citizen brings older people to the group and spends time with them during the club sessions, which are based around socialising, games and a shared meal. The group have also engaged a range of other volunteers, including one in her 20s, to help with ordering the food, cooking and socialising and have now set up Glebe Farm Trust as another CIC. This illustrates how community members and organisations can come together and use their different assets and interests to achieve something that alone would be much harder.

What are the benefits of adopting an ABCD approach?

There is limited robust evidence of the effectiveness of the ABCD model and it can be difficult to capture wider social impacts. However, the same sources highlight that there are numerous promising ABCD initiatives.[5] It is clear that, done well, ABCD can empower communities and harness the power of individuals to work together in their shared interest. We summarise some of the benefits below.

A greater sense of community: as a community mobilises its assets, members benefit from improved confidence that they have something of value to contribute – encouraging a sense of growing community pride.

Increased community connectivity: as members of the community engage it increases community participation and can reach more community members who may not have engaged within the community previously.

Increased skills within the community: as more people become involved, key skills, such as leadership and collaboration, can be strengthened within the community. This may lead to further projects being started.

More sustainable activities: Building on community strength should increase the likelihood that activities, support and other local solutions can be maintained over the longer term. The best examples of ABCD across Birmingham have helped to build capacity, create active citizens and reduce reliance on external support.

[5] A life less lonely: the state of the art in interventions to reduce loneliness in people with mental health problems (2017). Mann, F., et al. https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs00127-017-1392-y.pdf

Chat and Splash, Moseley Road Baths

Chat and Splash organise swimming sessions for older women from a diverse range of backgrounds who were otherwise unlikely to engage in physical activity. The sessions are run from local asset Moseley Road Baths, a community-run swimming pool and registered charity. The women built their confidence through attending the supported sessions and are now happy to attend the baths alone and pay for swimming.

Having identified a new community need Moseley Road Baths now provide daily women-only sessions. This provides them with additional revenue and the trustees have decided to employ a session worker to specifically run classes for the women. This in turn is supporting the local economy.

Taking an ABCD approach – the experience of Ageing Better in Birmingham

In the case of Ageing Better in Birmingham there was recognition that delivering a pure ABCD approach was often challenging. In this section we explore some of the barriers and enablers to ABCD, drawing on key learning from the programme.

Key challenge: new ways of thinking

Taking an asset-based approach is new for many people and can take some time to get used to. Service providers will need to cede some of their power to the community. People may want to have a role within their community but find it uncomfortable to take ownership and responsibility for identifying and mobilising the resources needed. Moving away from thinking in a deficit-based way - considering what is missing and how to replace

it – was difficult for some involved with Ageing Better in Birmingham. The time and support needed to change attitudes and approaches should not be underestimated.

Key challenge: lack of local infrastructure

A common criticism of ABCD is the notion that all communities have the necessary assets to tackle complex issues. It is certainly clear that having active voluntary and community infrastructure can help to develop and maintain community activity and those areas where this was lacking needed greater help from Ageing Better in Birmingham to develop Networks.

Birmingham, like other areas, has experienced substantial cuts in public spending, and the extent of local infrastructure to build upon is mixed. A view commonly expressed was that it is unrealistic to expect new activities to be developed without additional resource.

> "There's been an expectation that people can just, like, get people off the streets in community centres and bring them together and they'll just miraculously keep meeting up, without somewhere to meet, without some food, and I just don't think it's realistic."

> "We've got absolutely nothing [in this area], because there isn't even any green spaces, really. So we've introduced kerbside coffee clubs. We go with fold-up tables and portable big flasks and set up a little coffee club on the corner of a street. That gave us the opportunity of knocking on doors and getting to speak to people as well, because there isn't even any what we would call 'bumping spaces'."

However, there are examples where Network Enablers and active citizens have been successful in coming up with innovate solutions to overcome the challenge of lack of infrastructure, such as kerbside coffee clubs where residents can meet for a drink and a chat.

This highlights the need for creative thinking and support to overcome a lack of resources.

Key challenge: influence of the Ageing Better Fund

On one level, the Ageing Better Fund has been hugely beneficial in providing funding to establish and develop large numbers of groups that have engaged with older people. However, with hindsight it is also clear that the Fund has had a substantial influence on the extent to which asset-based approaches have been established across the programme. Generating applications to the Fund often became the main focus of conversations between programme staff and groups of active citizens. It was seen by staff as the primary method by which they could attract people to the programme and encourage them to create new activities. The Fund also potentially reduced the focus on using assets from within the community and reinforced the belief that external resources are always needed.

" I think people need an incentive to get involved with something. You know, we're a programme, we've got to have an incentive for the people to get involved. So, the Fund has been that draw for people, certainly in my area anyway. "

Interestingly, historical wariness by the LGBT community of organisations in authority and a reluctance to take on the administrative burden that comes with external funding means there have been fewer applications to the Fund by LGBT groups. As a result, this community have demonstrated a more asset-based way of working than some of the other communities targeted by Ageing Better in Birmingham.

> *It's drawn upon people's knowledge, their enthusiasm, their own experience, their willingness to come together and work together and to seek out other allies who will provide possibly more practical resources, venues, money [...] people have had very little interest in the Ageing Better Fund and part of that has been because people have looked to their own resources to form groups and activities.*

Key challenge: aligning the model with funding requirements

Ageing Better in Birmingham uses a limited number of outcome indicators relating to loneliness and social isolation designed to offer a measurable assessment of impact. In the early stages of the programme, delivery partners were also set targets for engaging groups and generating applications to the Fund. There is an inherent tension between taking an ABCD approach and the requirement to deliver outputs for a funder or contracting authority. In the case of Ageing Better in Birmingham, early learning from the programme evaluation showed that the focus on target-led delivery influenced Network Enabler behaviour to promote the Fund above focusing on community development activity. The programme focus was subsequently redirected from the number of applications to the Fund towards building community capacity, with Enablers acting as community connectors.

> "If you were working in an asset-based community development way and somebody's resourcing that, they need to be working in an asset-based way as well, otherwise, it's just going to be problems and conflicts, I think. So, as much as possible, the funder has got to be on-board with the whole ethos of that way of working.

Key enabler: ensuring programme-wide buy-in

Effective implementation of an ABCD approach requires the buy-in from local community and voluntary organisations. Establishing working partnerships, signposting and sharing resources is key, as is committing to cultivating the necessary organisational culture. A shared view on what ABCD is, the benefits and how it can be achieved is needed. It is necessary to allocate time and resources for training staff as well as members of the community.

Ageing Better in Birmingham invested considerable time working with delivery partners to co-produce theories of change[6], setting out common goals and articulating the steps needed to achieve these. This process helped to reaffirm the wider ABCD approaches with the Network Enablers.

[6] For more information on Theories of Change see https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/how-to/how-to-build-a-theory-of-change#

Key enabler: The role of community connectors

Empowering communities rarely happens spontaneously. The Ageing Better in Birmingham approach of using Network Enablers is one way to encourage community development. Network Enablers play the role of 'connectors', identifying and linking up community assets. This includes helping individuals to become active citizens and supporting grassroots organisations and groups to consider how they could help address isolation.

> I might be the person helping them make connections with other groups or with other agencies or individuals that can be helpful to them. I see a lot of my role as brokering relationships between people and helping people see their own potential.

Friends of Sheldon Park

This gardening group is run by volunteers who are mostly over the age of 50. They are developing a community area for local groups and residents to use. Alongside allotments there is a tea room and picnic area. The group approached their Network Enabler to help them to connect with other groups in the area and promote the project. One of the raised beds has been offered for Ageing Better participants and the rest of the site is available for other activities.

Key enabler: Local understanding

Understanding the community you are working with is key. The needs and assets of communities will be different. Some areas have well developed infrastructure and a vibrant community sector, others less so. The approach adopted by Ageing Better in Birmingham to focus on four distinct areas (two geographic – Tyburn and Sparkbrook, and two experiential – older carers and LGBT people) helped to better target support.

Identifying what local assets are available is an important first step and this understanding needs to come from those within the community. This is especially important in areas with very little infrastructure, where communities may feel undervalued and have lost some of their community identity. In Sparkbrook, Ageing Better in Birmingham supported the mapping of community assets as part of a local action plan. This included identifying local groups and associations and the assets they held such as buildings and minibuses available to share or loan. Events were held for associations to come together to share ideas and begin to collaborate.

Key enabler: time and resource

Establishing and sustaining connections between people takes time. It has taken longer than envisioned to build local capacity in some areas and in many instances groups required greater levels of support from Network Enablers to get their ideas off the ground, get funding and keep things running.

There is a need for those involved to be creative and innovative in their approach where communities have little in the way of physical assets or support infrastructure. More support may be needed to facilitate the growth of confidence and leadership of communities to start to look at alternative ways of developing their areas.

Overall, ABCD approaches take time and patience; time to build trusting relationships and patience to work at the pace of the citizens, following their lead. But, ultimately, it can be rewarding for everyone involved.

About this leaflet

This leaflet was produced as part of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme. The content is based on learning from the programme. The examples are of activities supported by the programme and the quotes are from people running and taking part in activities.

Ageing Better in Birmingham is part of Ageing Better, the six-year (2015-2021) £78million programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Ageing Better partnerships are based in 14 locations across England, from Torbay to Middlesbrough and the Isle of Wight to East Lindsey. Working with local people, charities, businesses, public sector services and voluntary groups the Ageing Better partnerships are exploring creative ways for older people to be actively involved in their local communities, helping to combat social isolation and loneliness. Ageing Better is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing services which aim to make people's lives healthier and happier.

Further information and useful contacts

Ageing Better in Birmingham
www.ageingbetterinbirmingham.co.uk

Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC)
www.bvsc.org

Asset-Based Community Development Institute
https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/Pages/default.aspx