

## *Vintage Communities*

---

Burcu Borysik, Research and Policy Coordinator

Alice Cheatle, Research and Policy Assistant

September 2014

Sitra, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, 55 Bondway, London, SW8 1SJ

Charity Reg No 290599 Company Reg No 1862908

## Contents

Summary .....	3
About Sitra .....	8
The Commission.....	8
About <i>Vintage Communities</i> .....	8
Background .....	9
Commissioning for ABCD .....	15
Getting started: Involving citizens .....	17
Practicing ABCD .....	22
Withdrawing Support .....	25
What change has it made? .....	26
Challenges and opportunities .....	28
Take away messages for housing, care and support sectors .....	31
References .....	34
Appendix- Marc Mordey's Response: Housing and ABCD .....	37

## Summary

In February 2014, *Vintage Communities* approached Sitra to evaluate the impact of two pilot project sites in Balham and Barking and Dagenham and to identify key strengths and weakness of the *Vintage Communities'* Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach in meeting their strategic objective 'to create self sustaining initiatives to fulfil the aspirations of the community'.

The findings and recommendations in this report are based on a triangulation of resources including a desktop review on Asset Based Community Development, co-directors' field-notes and finally semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants, especially 'community connectors' as well as councillors and commissioners.

The report examines the *Vintage Communities'* achievements and challenges in building sustainable communities, and makes recommendations for the future delivery of the programme. We have found that:

### *Commissioning for ABCD:*

1. Interviews with Vintage Communities and local commissioners highlighted a mutual recognition of the added social and financial value of ABCD, in bringing individuals together and building informal networks, consequently reducing social isolation and reducing the need for statutory services in times of need. Our research also highlights the opportunity to bring together Health and Wellbeing Boards, Adult Social Care Services and housing to co-commission ABCD projects to promote social cohesion, improve health and wellbeing and save money for the public purse.
2. Commissioners and project leaders should remember that **finding connectors is more difficult than the literature appears to suggest** and more-than adequate time should be allocated to build trust between the individuals carrying out the project and local citizens. A succinct public message that clarifies that individuals will not be buying products but producing them through their own involvement should be delivered, ideally through conversations in person, rather than 'cold calling' or sending out letters and pamphlets.
3. Commissioners, councillors and project leaders should not underestimate **the power of the 'grapevine'**. Most individuals hear about the project from their local connectors. This means that in practice, an ABCD project that aims to reach individuals who do not necessarily interact with their neighbours should try to establish connectors in a multitude of locations, for example, schools to involve children, colleges and workplaces to involve young people, local outreach teams to involve homeless people, and so forth.

4. Commissioners and ABCD practitioners may **agree on outcomes** they would like to achieve, but there should also be a recognition of the developmental, citizen-led nature of the project to avoid any attempt at ‘cherry-picking’, i.e. working with only the citizens that are easier to engage. There needs to be a balance between developing the project at the pace of the people involved, and delivering sustainable outcomes identified by commissioners. Therefore **transparency is vital**.
5. **The role boundaries of councillors and formal institutions should be clearly mapped out** at the beginning of ABCD projects, in consultation with the commissioners at local authorities. This will avoid suspicion among the citizens about being ‘pushed over’ to achieve councillor’s or institutions’ wants and expectations.
6. **Issues around mobility and lack of available public spaces** (parks with no seats for example) **can be a major hindrance**: Therefore local authorities should address their provisions to overcome these issues. Solutions such as providing information on accessible transport may aid the practicalities of widening active participation.
7. A key point learned from the pilot sites was **the importance of time management**. To really follow ABCD principles, it is necessary to be led by the people developing the project at their pace. In practice, this led to an inability to plan too far ahead as well as necessitating a longer period of time than originally anticipated. The organic development of networks takes time, as does establishing trust within the communities and overcoming any initial hesitance or resistance. The initial offer from Vintage Communities covered a six month period; this was extended to twelve months.
8. Vintage Communities has an understandable fondness for ‘**organic growth**’- but our study investigating reflective diaries and consulting citizens found that this is a slow process, impeding the project’s ability to demonstrate large scale involvement. This can be overcome by involving existing formal institutions, along with informal networks, in community development work. Many housing associations and support and care providers are looking for opportunities to develop their offer of support networks around their clients: **Equal partnership** with them would be beneficial for both ABCD practitioners and individuals requiring housing, care and support.

### *Practicing ABCD*

1. Both pilot sites show **the capacity of ABCD to deliver a citizen-led approach** to shaping public services. Individuals involved were able to prioritise their needs, define their aspirations and engage with authorities to demand the required change.
2. Citizens described events as an opportunity to share and gain skills, and in return there was a clear sense of being **recognised and valued as active partners**.

3. **Making friends** was considered to be one of the most notable benefits by the majority of interviewees, regardless of which event they participated in. This highlights that the very existence of the events themselves are significant as they facilitate contact with others.
4. ABCD practitioners should **not shy away from seeking external assistance**, even if this can only be sourced from a formal institution. Formal institutions, like individuals and communities, contain a vast amount of skills and expertise and can help to support the development of communities. These include schools, libraries and housing providers which can offer ample space and local connections.
5. ABCD practitioners should recognise **the importance of leadership in communities**. Some individuals may lack the confidence to lead, and some others may choose not to. This may be due to parenthood or carer responsibilities, or health problems. Where individuals wish not to lead the projects, there is a risk that the work and time invested in developing a community might not deliver the desired results. It is therefore vital for practitioners to engage with a variety of different connectors, encompassing all sections of society to ensure that the weight of responsibility to lead can be shared.

### *Withdrawing support*

1. Withdrawing support from a community development project based on personal ties rather than professional relationships needs to be evaluated as ending a **personal relationship**. Individuals who have invested a lot of trust and effort into their relationship with practitioners can feel left behind and may lack confidence. Community development of this type requires time, patience and perseverance, so practitioners should introduce a **more structured and staged devolvement**.
2. It is important for ABCD practitioners not only to build confidence in the community but also to ensure that this will not wither away in their absence. Individuals should be directed to **low levels of support** provided by the wider ABCD network.
3. ABCD practitioners should also consider working closely with **timebanking** schemes where available, or seek to involve local businesses as a way to incentivise community involvement.

### *Opportunities*

1. **Linking housing, care and health for strong communities:** Our study has found the Vintage Communities' ABCD approach was effective in bringing older people together, fostering lasting friendships and consequently reducing social isolation and improving health and wellbeing of older people. **There is ample evidence in the literature that building informal networks around reduces the need for statutory services and in this way, savings to public's purse can be made.** This opportunity has been recognised by Adult Social Care commissioners already, and in one area the involvement of Health and Wellbeing

Boards is much encouraging. Sitra believes it is now time for housing associations and charities that provide general or specialised housing to get involved.

2. Sitra membership base evidences that housing with care and support sector has been leading the way in service user involvement, delivering personalised support, promoting co-production of services, and **ABCD is just the next step to recognise resource and utilise individuals' expertise in *not just services but in wider community***. There are already some initiatives such as May Day Trust, which works with younger people who are at risk or leaving care, and Bromford Support which involves a multitude of client groups, including older people, people with learning difficulties, and people with mental health problems.
3. ABCD approach, with its premises around building informal networks around individuals and complementing, rather than, substituting formal institutions **presents a sincere opportunity for bridging the seemingly separate islands of health, housing and care**. Housing and housing support providers in every local authority area should strategically engage with health partners via Health and Wellbeing Boards to ensure their contribution to community development are fully recognised and integrated. The ideal time for this is when the boards are assessing their needs and priorities for the year(s) ahead and are preparing their Joint Strategic Needs Assessments and Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategies.
4. **Expanding the reach of ABCD approach:** Our literature review has demonstrated that the origins of ABCD approach lies within the capacity building among 'troubled communities' in urban centres in 1960s USA. Our local and contemporary rhetoric around 'broken society' or 'troubled families' clearly resonates with these early writings, and if only one message was to be taken away from the literature, would be **significant change that lasts cannot be achieved with an intervention based on needs, but can only derive from centring views, experiences and assets of individuals, who live so called 'troubled lives' in so called 'troubled places'**. We therefore urge commissioners of Adult Social Care Services and housing to consider involving ABCD practitioners, such as Vintage Communities, to develop their offer of support for these individuals.

## *Risks*

1. ABCD practitioners in the future will be likely to work within PBR contracts, being paid to the amount of achievements they have been able to deliver in a set period of time. This might bring the risk of **'hitting the target but missing the point'**: Commissioners and ABCD practitioners may agree on outcomes they would like to achieve, but there should also be a recognition of the developmental, citizen led nature of the project to avoid any attempt at 'cherry-picking', i.e. working with easier to engage citizens. There needs to be a balance between developing the project at the pace of the people involved, and delivering sustainable outcomes identified by commissioners. Therefore transparency is vital.
2. There is some difficulty in **'delivering outcomes in set times'**: ABCD practitioners, like Vintage Communities has an understandable fondness of 'organic growth'- but our study

investigating reflective diaries and consulting citizens found this is a slow process, impeding in the project's ability to demonstrate large scale involvement. This can be overcome by involving existing formal institutions, along with informal networks, in community development work. Many housing associations, support and care providers are looking for opportunities to develop their offer of support networks around their clients: Equal partnership with them would be beneficial for both ABCD practitioners and individuals requiring housing, care and support.

3. ***ABCD should be seen as complementary but not a substitute to public services*** Our interviews with ABCD practitioners and commissioners have highlighted that for many, ABCD was interpreted in a larger framework of Big Society. Many accepted that previously statutory or publicly funded services will not be available in the future as a consequence of austerity measures and suggested that communities can help to substitute these gaps. However, our study demonstrates this is not quite the case- instead, any attempts to develop communities around vulnerable individuals require a clear engagement with already existing services, including schools, libraries, social housing, hostels and hospitals to identify connectors to involve the most entrenched populations.
4. **Commissioners, councillors and project leaders should not underestimate the power of 'grapevine'**. Most individuals hear about the project from their local connectors. This means in practice, an ABCD project that aims to reach individuals who do not necessarily interact with their neighbours, should try to establish connectors in a multitude of locations, for example, schools to involve children, colleges and workplaces to involve young people, local outreach teams to involve homeless people, and so forth. While we recognise that the voluntary organisations based on donations and individuals' commitment are not adequate to provide all the support individuals might need, individuals and communities will need to be involved in identifying where the gaps are, thinking creatively about how to fill the gaps and asking for investment where they might need help.

## About Sitra

Sitra is a national membership organisation with 30 years of experience in providing leadership, influencing policy through expertise, promoting best practice and providing consultancy, training, information and advice in order to:

- Promote positive outcomes for service users, providers and funders
- Drive the policy agenda
- Encourage a healthy, diverse and sustainable sector
- Support quality and professionalisation

We have a membership comprising of commissioners, providers and users of housing with health, care and support.

## The Commission

In February 2014, *Vintage Communities* approached Sitra to evaluate the impact of two pilot project sites in Balham and Barking and Dagenham and to identify key strengths and weakness of the *Vintage Communities*' Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach in meeting their strategic objective 'to create self sustaining initiatives to fulfil the aspirations of the community'.

The findings and recommendations in this report are based on a triangulation of resources including a desktop review on Asset Based Community Development, co-directors' field-notes and finally semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants, especially 'community connectors' as well as councillors and commissioners. Thereby the report examines the *Vintage Communities*' achievements and challenges in building sustainable communities, and makes recommendations for the future delivery of the programme.

## About *Vintage Communities*

*Vintage Communities* was established in November 2011 as a community interest company. *Vintage Communities* aim to enable and support older people to transform their communities as community builders using an Asset Based Community Approach. *Vintage Communities* is closely associated with both the International Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute. Both Deborah Klee and Marc Mordey are faculty members of ABCD Europe, which is affiliated to the ABCD Institute.



## Background

This chapter starts by tracing the origins of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), with its central premise to move away from a needs-driven service delivery model to a capacity-focused development model. It then moves on to explain how this theoretical approach translates into the current socio-economic climate in contemporary Britain. Finally the chapter identifies the ABCD's fundamental practices and explains how these were interpreted and adopted by *Vintage Communities*.

### *Origins of ABCD*

The origins of the ABCD approach can be traced back to the United States in the 1960s, at a time when many civil rights activists along with local governors were developing models to 'rebuild troubled communities' (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Kretzmann and McKnight collected 3000 stories from communities across the United States to develop evidence of ways in which ordinary citizens help to create self sustaining communities that build on the resources already available. They subsequently published *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Towards Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), which became the foundational text for the ABCD model.

In this book, Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) describe American cities as 'deeply troubled places' (p. 1) and identify that the root of the problem lies within the deepening economic disparities and social division between those on the 'ladder of opportunity' (p. 1) and those outside it. The result that they identify is a culmination of negative images of urban communities as places of 'violence, of joblessness and welfare dependency, of gangs and drugs and homelessness, of vacant and abandoned land and buildings [. . .] of needy and problematic and deficient neighbourhoods populated by needy and problematic and deficient people' (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 1-2). However, they suggest that viewing communities as a catalogue of social and economic problems and targeting resources based on deficits creates 'a wall of needs' (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 2) which further fragments and divides society. They propose that the solution instead lies in utilising the already existing resources within individuals and communities. They argue that the needs-based strategies focused on deficits and problems 'can only guarantee survival and can never lead to serious change or community development' (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 4).

The central premise of the ABCD approach then becomes the replacement of needs-driven approaches with a capacity-focused development. That is to say, the new approach highlights basing policy and practice decisions around individuals' and communities' strengths, skills and aspirations. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) suggest that each community possesses a unique set of assets, brought by individuals, civil society (or societies) and formal institutions. At the individual level, they

insist that recognition of people's skills and capacities, especially those who are marginalised due to their ethnic or religious background, sexual orientation, physical and mental disabilities and age, is vital in bringing in the expertise that will help to build communities from within. At the level of civil society, the relationships and bonds that make up the social interconnections of communities are suggested to be indispensable tools for development, capable of flexing to address individuals' future demands and expectations. Finally, it is put forward that formal institutions such as hospitals, social service agencies, schools, police forces, fire stations, libraries and all other services at the disposal of public can become hubs to weave strength into the social fabric of the community.

Soon after the publication of this text the ABCD Institute was founded, aiming to support the growing number of practitioners who are committed to work in an asset-based framework with the citizens and communities of the USA and Canada.

### *From 'Broken Society' to 'asset-based communities'*

A government brief on Britain's problems written at the start of the 2010 Parliament (Kennedy & Thorpe, 2010) explains:

*'Drug abuse, violent crime, teenage delinquency, family breakdown, welfare dependency, poor urban environments, educational failure, poverty, the loss of traditional values, teenage pregnancy, dysfunctional families, binge drinking, children who kill: all have been cited as proof that we have a broken society.'*

The way in which rhetoric about 'Broken Britain' propagates popular anxieties around economic problems, particularly of 'welfare dependency' as well as deficits identified as 'moral decay' or 'social recession', display an undeniable resemblance to Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) identification of American cities 'as deeply *troubled* places' (p. 1). Likewise the promises (and demands) in current political rhetoric to 'mend Britain's broken society' echo the sentiment of need-based approaches that seek out external experts to solve problems, through deficiency-oriented policies and programmes.

This can be identified in the UK government's attempts to target resources to the most vulnerable and '*troubled* families'. Intensive parenting classes, counselling and sanctions on not attending school or work appointments might be well intended, but as Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) argue, 'the wall of needs [that fragments society] is 'not based on hatred. . . but on good intentions to help' (p. 2). In a recent interview Clare McNeil (2012), a Senior Research Fellow at IPPR, argues 'the intentions behind this scheme are the right ones. It is only through highly personal and sustained efforts from dedicated workers that the lives of troubled families can be turned around but . . . [the scheme] removes power and control for the family to improve their lives, [giving them] a set of outcomes they have no influence over. There is a danger of hitting the target but missing the point, which is to *achieve lasting change*'.

McNeil's observations resonate with Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) conviction that significant and lasting change cannot be achieved with an intervention based on needs, but can only derive from a central focus on the views, experiences and assets of the individuals who live so-called 'troubled lives' in so-called 'troubled places'. In other words, **coproduction** (which demands that public services be designed and delivered by the people who use them, alongside with or instead of, those who traditionally provide them) is vital for achieving significant and sustainable outcomes.

The second suggestion is that the **connections** between individuals who care about each other and the community in which they live can become the basis of collective resources to draw upon.

The provision of services based on needs is also problematic due to the **limited availability of financial resources**. As a consequence of austerity measures, some previously statutory or publicly-funded services will not be available in the future. Whilst we recognise that voluntary organisations based on donations are often not adequate to provide all the support people might need, it is necessary that individuals and communities are involved in identifying where the gaps are in current social welfare provision, thinking creatively about how to fill them and asking for investment where needed. This citizen-led knowledge will then be instrumental in making the investments that will be most valued by the members of the community.

### *The evidence base for ABCD and its components*

Any proposal to replace traditional needs-driven service provision with an asset-based approach raises the question of how this might be achieved and whether these approaches would be effective. This section explores three practical components of ABCD, namely (i) person centred working and coproduction, (ii) fostering connections and participation and (iii) building community capacity to replace reliance on public finances. Existing evidence for how these three components help to achieve and sustain positive outcomes for both individuals and communities will be examined.

#### *(i) Person-centred working and coproduction*

The first premise of ABCD is that providing individuals with maximum choice and control over the public services they require and tailoring support to meet individuals' strengths, skills and aspirations is one of the key principles of all asset-based approaches. In services such as housing support, adult social care and health, individual assets are often identified through person-centred planning. In ABCD, these assets are identified by 'community connectors' (Russell, 2011), individuals who possess helpful local knowledge on who to contact about any given subject in a community. A community connector is a person that others turn to in order to find out who can help de-weed their garden on a Sunday afternoon, fix the leaking roof, look after the children while parents are out for a dinner, and so forth. These natural connections and local know-how is the way people get help on a daily basis, and so the ABCD approach capitalises on and consolidates this existing support network.

Identifying individuals' assets, along with their expectations and aspirations, and coproducing local solutions is the key to achieving outcomes that are relevant, meaningful and valuable for people who live in that community. The strongest evidence for the effectiveness of person-centred working is provided by a recent Think Local Act Personal survey (Hatton, Waters & Routledge, 2013) of 3000 people with personal budgets, which found that having choice and control resulted in 70% of participants feeling independent and living in dignity and a further 60% noting improved physical and mental wellbeing.

Coproduction dictates that individuals contribute their skills and their expertise gained through experience of existing services (or lack of) to produce with providers a more relevant and positive service. Coproduction aims to change the mantra of public services to 'work with rather than do unto users' (Cummins & Miller, 2007, p. 7). ABCD approaches suggest that actively involving individuals and valuing the contribution and assets of all participants ensures that the resulting response is flexible and receptive to local circumstances.

There are many positive examples of coproduction across the UK which provides evidence of both the effectiveness of the model and the sustainability of outcomes achieved. Chamberlain Forum's case studies on the coproduction of services in West Midlands (Slatter, 2011) demonstrate that these projects have been successful in getting people into long-term employment, helping local businesses thrive, improving housing and creating safer neighbourhoods, getting hold of fresh fruit and vegetables, improving physical and mental wellbeing and reducing social isolation. Another example is the KeyRing scheme<sup>1</sup>, which significantly improved the self-confidence and mutual support of tenants in social housing through the facilitation of productive interaction between them. Similarly, the Timebanking project in Broadway was shown to provide personally rewarding, meaningful and structured activities for participants, boosting self-esteem, generating qualifications and enabling people to find paid work or set up their own businesses (Breatherton & Pleace, 2014).

### *(ii) Fostering connections and participation*

The second premise of ABCD is that the community connectors who have identified individuals' assets in the community will also become instrumental in bringing these individuals together, increasing social connectedness for a tightly woven social fabric. . The benefits of community connectors have been demonstrated in a number of case studies, including Village Agents in Gloucestershire that are employed by the local authority<sup>2</sup> and CCG to pass on relevant information, and Community Navigators that work as part of the GP practices in Donnington<sup>3</sup> that help to connect older people who are at risk of isolation and loneliness.

There are a growing number of studies that demonstrate that the development of social capital prevents social isolation or atomisation and creates resilience to cope better with social issues

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sitra.org/documents/keyrings-presentation/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.villageagents.org.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.donningtonmedicalpractice.co.uk/info.aspx?p=11>

(Putnam, 1995), among other community benefits. These include a reduction in mortality (Putnam, 2000), reduction in the risk of abuse (Wightman, 2013), improved physical and mental wellbeing (Health Empowerment Leverage Project, 2011, Jenkins et al., 2008), especially at old age (Cattan, White, Bond & Learmouth, 2005). There is further evidence provided by National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) that community engagement can help promote the health and wellbeing of individuals (NICE, 2008).

### *(iii) Community capacity*

The third and final premise of ABCD is to build community resilience so that communities have the capacity to decide on their priorities and take action to make their neighbourhoods better places to live. Klee (2014) argues that the continuous existence of communities is more reliable in providing the capacity to transform society than the rapid turnover of staff in local authorities and other statutory agencies. She adds that the shared cultural history and local knowledge help to bring people together more effectively, especially after facing adversities and disasters. This was indeed the case in Boscastle after the floods of 2004 (Kelbie, 2008) and in Hackney after the riots of 2011.

Studies further demonstrate that community capacity is not only more durable and therefore more reliable than some other public services, but is also more cost effective. For instance, the LinkAge Plus project which developed partnerships between civil society and local and central government to improve quality of life and wellbeing of older people saved the public £2.85 for each £1 spent (Davis & Ritters, 2009).

### *Vintage Approach*

*Vintage Communities* works within the ABCD framework, and aims to motivate and support people to identify their priorities, contribute their own skill sets and improve their communities in a way that suits them. Following the previously discussed ABCD approach to identify *community connectors* that have local knowledge of problem-solvers and enablers, *Vintage* aims to, in their own words, 'get beyond the usual suspects and reach out to and capitalise upon the assets and ideas of those within communities whose voice is least often heard'. *Vintage* achieves this by making use of existing connections within the community. They start by talking to local people in order to find out what issues they care about, what changes they would like to see and what skills they are willing to share. They also contact associations and groups of older people and young people to identify their concerns, what they want to change, what they are already doing and the skills that they can contribute. For example, a school that wants to involve students in community work could assist residents in a care home to learn computer skills to keep in touch with family and friends.

*Vintage Communities'* ultimate aim is for a local community to be involved, inspired and enabled to identify solutions and create changes in a sustainable and long term way. Through setting up

independent co-operatives, they aim to drive a group of community connectors to maintain productive community based work.

## *Benefits*

*Vintage Communities* suggest the benefits of this approach are:

- Accessing an extensive and diverse network of older people to inform service development
- The opportunity to build a strategy based on neighbourhood plans developed by local citizens
- Enhancing the capacity of local communities
- Improving the wellbeing of older people
- Revitalising neighbourhoods
- Providing better outcomes for children and young people.

## **Commissioning for ABCD**

### *Framing the Vintage offer for commissioners*

*Vintage Communities* initiated two pilot sites to develop and evaluate the impact of their ABCD approach. In their proposed 9-12 months programme, they aimed to facilitate a neighbourhood to apply the ABCD process by providing mentor support, with the view to eventually rolling out the approach to more neighbourhoods through peer mentorship. During this time, ongoing support would be provided through their national network to share learning across communities

*Vintage Communities* was set up to develop asset based communities with and around older people. The rationale behind this was knowledge of the issues arising from the UK's ageing population, as over half the population is expected to be over 65 by 2030. In our interviews, *Vintage Communities* commented that the risk of isolation and loneliness, which impacts on individuals' health and wellbeing, is likely to increase with this demographic shift. They suggested that the development of inclusive social networks around older people would not only improve their health and wellbeing but acknowledge their contribution to wider society. Furthermore, developing and maintaining the independence of older people through community support has the dual benefit of improving the health and wellbeing of the individual and reducing the cost of care. This is an especially powerful incentive due to the background of public spending cuts and alterations; it is of interest to providers to present to commissioners a service that reduces the necessity for long term public spending on care.

Two pilot sites, one in the London Borough of Wandsworth and another in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, commissioned *Vintage Communities* to work with the people in the wards of Balham and Eastbrook respectively. The latter was identified as the most suitable, as it has the highest proportion of older residents in the Borough. Both wards were dominated by a park – Tooting Common and Eastbrook Country Park - and consisted of approximately 55 streets. The wards varied

considerably in demographics and development throughout the process. These neighbourhoods that the commissioners asked *Vintage Communities* to work with were very different. Balham is much more affluent than Dagenham, resulting in many differences in terms of the health of the people *Vintage* worked with, their aspirations, and confidence to lead initiatives and motivation to get involved.

### *Commissioners' Views*

Interviews with commissioners in both areas demonstrated that both councils were considering a number of models to promote local wellbeing in a number of different priority areas, including older people's health needs. In Wandsworth, the Health and Wellbeing Board requested that the council support *Vintage Communities*. As Dawn Warwick, Director of Adult Social Services, states, this was because:

- Running throughout its corporate plan and strategies, Wandsworth Council ascribes to a philosophy, that rather than provide fixed solutions, which risk creating dependency, it wishes to support communities to identify their own concerns and develop local solutions. This is in keeping with how *Vintage Communities* was promoted from the outset.
- The adopted Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy focus on 3 key themes, one of these being resilience. Acknowledging the challenging economic climate and the importance of promoting and sustaining resilient local communities, the Council was keen to explore the benefits and possible risks of *Vintage Communities'* asset-based community development approach.
- Whilst the Department of Adult Social Services was the designated commissioning department, the benefits of the 'from the community up' approach reach beyond only those individuals in adult social care services, as people throughout the community benefit. Other council services, such as Lifelong Learning and Economic Development, and other sectors including key agencies within the Voluntary and Community Sector are impacted.

Likewise, the overarching ambition of *Vintage Communities* resonated with the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham's vision and strategy to empower local people and promote social networks among individuals to reduce the need for provision of statutory services. In this way, the ABCD approach was seen as a way to build and consolidate partnerships across the statutory, private and third sectors.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Sitra would like to comment, however, that commissioners' desires to reduce the need for statutory services can have an adverse effect on partnerships with and resources of formal institutions, resulting in a reduction of resources from services such as housing and health that already exist within the community and serve an important role.



*Key learnings: Commissioning for ABCD*

*Interviews with Vintage Communities and local commissioners highlighted a mutual recognition of the added social and financial value of ABCD, through bringing individuals together and building informal networks, consequently reducing social isolation and reducing the need for statutory services in times of need. Our research also highlights the opportunity to **bring together Health and Wellbeing Boards, Adult Social Care Services and housing to co-commission ABCD projects to promote social cohesion, improve health and wellbeing and save money for the public purse.***

## **Getting started: Involving citizens**

### *Vintage's Experience*

The first task identified by *Vintage Communities* when working in an area was the identification of 'community connectors' defined as those who others naturally turn to for help and support, who have knowledge of and links to problem-solvers and enablers.

However, as they note in their reflective diary, it *'perhaps [was] more difficult to "find the Connectors" than the literature suggests'*. In one area, Vintage had to carry out a series of 'cold calling' and it was difficult for them to establish personal connections and trust over the telephone. Many assumed '*Vintage*' must be selling something- and just did not wish to engage. In East Brook, Councillor Pamela Burgon provided them with three names and addresses as potential connectors and after knocking on several doors and posting letters, one of the three people was found who was interested in talking to them. It was through this contact that they were introduced to the Rush Green Tenants Association and the Rush Green Sports and Social Club.

Taking the connections further and involving more individuals through schools, libraries and other services also slowly progressed. As Vintage highlights in their diary, they began to *'work alongside the grapevine, developing in a really relaxed, organic matter'*.

In Bedford, the first meeting took place in a Polish Club, attended by four neighbours, two councillors who live in the ward, Marc and Deborah. Many others who were invited did not come to the event. Vintage's notes read: *'generally lots of energy and enthusiasm but tempered with warnings that everyone was busy and could not commit to anything and concerns about how initiatives would be self-sustaining after [move] on'*. Indeed, for many participants, the meeting was an occasion to catch up with friends and contacts, instead of strategising how to take this 'new thing on the block' further. This illustrates one difficulty with the ABCD approach; being able to engage individuals in a connection that goes beyond daily conversations.

Six meetings, eleven core participants and several weeks later, the local connectors began to take shape. These included Town Centre Manager, Ravenstone Primary School and St Anselm's RC School hoping to develop a Golden Time on Friday afternoon for students and older people, Chestnut Grove Academy seeking to develop a Citizenship module and carry out an oral history for the Duke of Edinburgh award and two potential housing connectors; Wimbourne House and Viridian Housing.

In East Brook, several individual meetings took place in order to try and identify Community Connectors. These brought together the community centre/social club on Dagenham Road, offered the main hall for meetings on Wednesday evenings; The Tenants Association expressed their wish to improve activities; Oxlow Lane Baptist Church expressed their interest in developing their gardening and knitting group; Barking and Dagenham Council for Voluntary Service, expressed the CVS's interest in bringing together community and voluntary organisations; Barking and Dagenham College offered their facilities, including cheap dining options and opportunities to get involved in the Christmas stalls, and the Rush Green Library offered meeting space on the days the library was closed.

These generous offerings within the community helped to involve more citizens. Subsequently, four group meetings were organised and local connectors began to emerge.

### *Councillors' Experience*

Even at the earliest stages of the project, councillors and commissioners have attempted to integrate the offer of *Vintage Communities* within their strategies to develop and maintain cohesive and resilient communities. For instance, Wandsworth's Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy defined resilience as one of the three key priorities to improve outcomes. For them, resilience meant a '*sense of individual vitality to undertake activities which are meaningful and engaging and allow them to feel competent and autonomous, to gain stock of inner resources to help them cope when things go wrong and adapt to changes beyond their immediate control and supportive relationships and a sense of connection with others*'.

In addition, councillors emphasised that the promotion of community cohesion and empowerment provided an opportunity to participate in grounded engagement with the community. They suggested that trust developed on a local level can change the way people view and interact with the council. The preventative aspect provided further appeal, enabling insight to be gained into where the current and future needs occur within society, as identified by the people themselves. This could then be used to inform service provision and development. The councillors highlighted that by keeping people engaged, independent and motivated, targeted additional support could be given to help people maximise their wellbeing and improve their quality of life.

The involvement of councillors was more predominant in Bedford ward, and while their agenda to promote intergenerational relationships (as promoted by Age UK) was admirable, their desire to pin

down and lead projects was sometimes perceived by participants to pose a '*danger to take leadership instead of allowing local people to build resilience*'.

### *Citizens' perspective*

When questioned on this process, the majority of individuals involved echoed Vintage's view of power of '*grapevine*', and highlighted that they engaged with the project through 'word of mouth'. The personal connection many of the participants developed with the organisers, who acted as initiators or connectors, provided a further inducement to become involved with the project. For others, engagement with the local council played a leading role, providing an opportunity to make a real difference within the community. However, the significance of external advertising such as on volunteer websites and old age forums is not to be underestimated.

We asked individuals who had been involved in the *Vintage Communities* either as participants or connectors about what their motivation was to get involved in this project. Many expressed a view that *Vintage* was an opportunity to make links with others in the same neighbourhood and develop a sense of community. While this shared value formed the basis of moral grounds of involvement, on further prompting during interviews it became apparent that individuals' motivation varied greatly. Some expressed that their involvement was a result of curiosity and self-gain, and for others it was an opportunity to get out and about and reduce their own isolation or loneliness. It was found that individuals who were more interested in benefitting from the social offer of *Vintage Communities* were less likely to engage with the theoretical basis of asset-based approaches and treated it as a more practical opportunity.

Others shared a more altruistic and charitable approach. For example, one interviewee who previously worked in mental health and probation sectors expressed their desire to work with marginalised groups in non-professional capacity and help to bring them into informal support networks within the community. For example, Caroline from Bedford Ward, said:

*'I have worked in Wandsworth and Lambeth as an adult basic education organiser and then a probation officer. My last job was as a social worker in a Substance Misuse Team in Lambeth. I am currently volunteering with Wandsworth Mind on a local history project. I want to use my skills and experience. In my work I have tended to work with people on the margins of society. I see my role as encouraging people to take part in the wider community for their benefit and the benefit of others. I also need to be encouraged to take part in the wider community and attending meetings has helped me to do that. Vintage aims to make positive connections between people and that is why I am happy to be involved.'*

### *Is there anyone left out?*

Any evaluation of 'involvement' strategies should also include if there is anyone left out from the project. This section highlights four obstacles to inclusive community participation in asset-based

projects. As both *Vintage Communities* and individuals highlighted, utilising existing personal networks and word of mouth was key in convincing individuals to get involved in the project and participate in the activities. All of the individuals interviewed already knew a connector or knew a friend who knew the connector. There remains a hindrance for those without previously existing connections, for example if they had recently moved to the area, if they were too hesitant to socialise with people they have never met, or if they do not have shared language skills with other participants.

For example, in Bedford ward a Polish old people's home could not engage because residents could not speak English and there were not any skills within the community to translate them. In East Brook, it was found that younger people who are employed full time were less likely to get to know their neighbours. As neighbours move on and new people arrive in the community, connections break down. Pamphlets and leaflets with information about activities were posted through letter boxes but this did not have a noticeable impact. While we recognise organic growth has the potential to eventually reach individuals at the margins of the society, this is a slow process. Indeed, as highlighted in the reflective diaries, they *'have to travel at the pace that core Connectors are comfortable and able to go at'*. But this means that projects with a limited time frame, such as *Vintage Communities*, are unlikely to demonstrate their contribution to reach the most entrenched communities within the allotted project time.

Secondly, whilst the literature does not focus upon this problem, individuals and communities can be intolerant towards others and in many parts of the country the ethnic, religious and socio-economic divides present obstacles to cohesive connections. Our evaluation study found social divisions, as some wealthier people did not wish to get involved with those living in social housing settings or to have any contact with people who experience homelessness with undiagnosed and untreated physical and mental health problems. On the other hand, others desired that the group reflect the real diversity of people living in their ward, and they planned to address this by asking friends and neighbours to introduce them to people from the unrepresented communities.

Thirdly, the technical language of ABCD can become a hindrance for those who would like to embrace a more simplified approach. This is not to detract from the importance and value of ABCD, as the ideology is clearly a significant motivation for participation, highlighted by commissioners, councillors and citizens. However, the ABCD approach appears to have an academic weight which some participants felt was too technical, and 'irrelevant' to their own practical contribution to the project. There were conflicting ideas surrounding the motivation for participation by some of the core group members interviewed, some viewing the ABCD approach as a key inducement with others completely unaware of its involvement in the project due to the inaccessibility of the terms used.

Fourthly, the most common barrier to involvement in the project was related to issues of mobility, lack of effective transport to events, health and other commitments such as caring for a partner or being a member of other groupings. Many of these issues stem from the age demographic of the participants involved.

9. Commissioners and project leaders should remember that **finding connectors is more difficult than the literature appears to suggest** and more-than adequate time should be allocated to build trust between the individuals carrying out the project and local citizens. A succinct public message that clarifies that individuals will not be buying products but producing them through their own involvement should be delivered, ideally through conversations in person, rather than 'cold calling' or sending out letters and pamphlets.
10. Commissioners, councillors and project leaders should not underestimate **the power of the 'grapevine'**. Most individuals hear about the project from their local connectors. This means that in practice, an ABCD project that aims to reach individuals who do not necessarily interact with their neighbours should try to establish connectors in a multitude of locations, for example, schools to involve children, colleges and workplaces to involve young people, local outreach teams to involve homeless people, and so forth.
11. A key point learned from the pilot sites was **the importance of time management**. To really follow ABCD principles, it is necessary to be led by the people developing the project at their pace. In practice, this led to an inability to plan too far ahead as well as necessitating a longer period of time than originally anticipated. The organic development of networks takes time, as does establishing trust within the communities and overcoming any initial hesitance or resistance. The initial offer from Vintage Communities covered a six month period; this was extended to twelve months.
12. Vintage Communities has an understandable fondness for '**organic growth**'- but our study investigating reflective diaries and consulting citizens found that this is a slow process, impeding the project's ability to demonstrate large scale involvement. This can be overcome by involving existing formal institutions, along with informal networks, in community development work. Many housing associations and support and care providers are looking for opportunities to develop their offer of support networks around their clients: **Equal partnership** with them would be beneficial for both ABCD practitioners and individuals requiring housing, care and support.
13. Commissioners and ABCD practitioners may **agree on outcomes** they would like to achieve, but there should also be a recognition of the developmental, citizen-led nature of the project to avoid any attempt at 'cherry-picking', i.e. working with only the citizens that are easier to engage. There needs to be a balance between developing the project at the pace of the people involved, and delivering sustainable outcomes identified by commissioners. Therefore **transparency is vital**.
14. **The role boundaries of councillors and formal institutions should be clearly mapped out** at the beginning of ABCD projects, in consultation with the commissioners at local authorities. This will avoid suspicion among the citizens about being 'pushed over' to achieve councillor's or institutions' wants and expectations.

15. *To ensure a wide basis of appeal of ABCD methodology, it is important for practitioners to simplify their language and include both their practical offer as well as theoretical legitimacy in the early stages of the project and to engage in livelier illustrations of the theory.*
16. *Issues around mobility and lack of available public spaces (parks with no seats for example) can be a major hindrance: Therefore local authorities should address their provisions to overcome these issues. Solutions such as providing information on accessible transport may aid the practicalities of widening active participation.*

## Practicing ABCD

### *From connectors to communities*

A close reading of reflective diaries and interviews with participants suggest that the initial meetings setting out the skills and experience of individuals as a resource were very wide ranging - an unexpected result for both participants and practitioners. Many group members were active in organising events and gatherings, taking the opportunities to connect further.

In Bedford Ward, the group made a large map of the ward with facilities, clubs, and businesses that were a potential resource to the community. The markers on the map increased with each meeting. During the initial meetings, the group was to share with us what they felt passionate about and would be motivated to improve: Some of the offerings were about reaching parts of the community, and others were about specific activities. One suggestion was a creative Christmas tree, a scheme in which everyone offers one of their skills as a gift. In another event organised by the group, refreshments were offered by the core group and partners (one of the core group worked as a professional chef) with funding from Balham Rotary Club and Waitrose (Balham), and student volunteers from South Thames College helped to welcome guests and serve refreshments.

In Eastbrook Ward, the majority of the 14 connectors lived in the Rush Green area but some others lived in the area around Reede Road. The latter visited the Bell Farm Avenue area but were unable to successfully engage local people there. The group had five meetings with connectors; with the last two attended by only four or five people from the original group, due to age-related problems or carer responsibilities. Nevertheless, they were able to organise several projects, including improving facilities in Central Park by arranging to meet with someone from the Parks department for a walk around to identify where an additional bench or two would be most useful. They also organised a Fish and Chips event in May and Baker Social Club, which became available for the use of local residents as the pharmaceutical firm closed earlier in the year.

These projects on both pilot sites demonstrate a citizen-led approach in shaping public services. Individuals involved were able to prioritise their needs, define their aspirations and engage with authorities to demand the required changes.

### *Activities*

We asked all interviewed participants which activities they got involved in and which they considered to be of most value or the greatest success. Their responses included:

- An oral history project. This project, organised in collaboration with local schools, aims to include audio-visual material, photographs and written testimonials to provide a picture of local history.
- Coffee mornings and other events at Wimborne house. These events facilitated the successful development of relationships between residents in sheltered accommodation and members of the wider community.
- Teaching English to immigrant mothers at a local primary school (ESOL classes). This aims to draw marginalised groups into society and enable them to communicate more effectively with their children's teachers as well as the community as a whole.
- Fish and chip lunch was established as a way of engaging local people and encouraging greater involvement and attracting new participants.
- The offer of knitting lessons to those interested, the possibility of sharing skills both with councillors and at the local college as well as potentially knitting coats for local rescue centres and scarves for Christmas boxes.
- Community gardening projects.
- Computer skills club where older people are invited to the local college to learn skills such as e mailing, Skype and general use of the internet.

This is not a prescriptive list of activities, but rather an indication of the scope of activities which could be offered on a local level, and were successfully provided through the *Vintage Communities* pilots.

The events described with the most enthusiasm or considered to be of the greatest success by participants were those in which they felt that they were making a valued contribution and impact. This is significant as they were not passive recipients of services or events; in contrast, their skills and contributions were recognised and valued as active partners.

Furthermore, making friends was considered to be one of the most notable benefits by the majority of interviewees, regardless of which event they participated in. This highlights that the very existence of the events themselves, in any form, are significant as they facilitate contact with others.

### *Sharing and Developing Skills*

A key aim of *Vintage Communities* is to work with the skills, knowledge and talents of every community member, capitalising on their assets and ideas to transform their communities.

Participants involved in the project come from a variety of backgrounds, bringing valuable knowledge, skills and expertise in many different areas. Some skills focused primarily upon inter-personal elements such as communication, trust building and gaining acceptance within the community, whilst others focused upon previous experience in a professional capacity. However, it is important that professionals are considered to be part of the community and are involved as such, not in their professional capacity but as people with knowledge-based skills, thereby blurring and removing boundaries between those with professional and non-professional skills.

It is this range of skills which enables the project to become sustainable on a local level, as a variety of roles are necessary for the successful running of events and administration of the project. However the outsourcing of skills may also be necessary, with reliance on local authorities and other associations for certain skills and knowledge. For example in Bedford it was necessary to turn to external bodies for expertise on structural and organisational elements such as the creation of a constitution and mission statement. This outsourcing of skills can extend to the involvement of an inter-generational skills-share. This is exemplified in the computer skills sessions held in both areas at local colleges and libraries for older people with limited technological knowledge, run by sixth form college students. Therefore external assistance, expertise and support play a vital role in contributing to the sustainability of the initiatives.

Despite the large success of the skills-share in Eastbrook ward, the confidence of individuals to lead a group was lacking. Despite the fact that members of the network had many ideas which they were keen to develop and put into practice, they did not have the motivation to lead and therefore required skills from others. *Vintage Communities* worked with statutory, voluntary and community-based organisations to find a leading body for some of the proposed initiatives.

*Key learning: Practicing ABCD*

1. Both pilot sites show **the capacity of ABCD to deliver a citizen-led approach** to shaping public services. Individuals involved were able to prioritise their needs, define their aspirations and engage with authorities to demand the required change.
2. Citizens described events as an opportunity to share and gain skills, and in return there was a clear sense of being **recognised and valued as active partners**.
3. **Making friends** was considered to be one of the most notable benefits by the majority of interviewees, regardless of which event they participated in. This highlights that the very existence of the events themselves are significant as they facilitate contact with others.
4. ABCD practitioners should **not shy away from seeking external assistance**, even if this can only be sourced from a formal institution. Formal institutions, like individuals and communities, contain a vast amount of skills and expertise and can help to support the development of



communities. These include schools, libraries and housing providers which can offer ample space and local connections.

5. ABCD practitioners should recognise **the importance of leadership in communities**. Some individuals may lack the confidence to lead, and some others may choose not to. This may be due to parenthood or carer responsibilities, or health problems. Where individuals wish not to lead the projects, there is a risk that the work and time invested in developing a community might not deliver the desired results. It is therefore vital for practitioners to engage with a variety of different connectors, encompassing all sections of society to ensure that the weight of responsibility to lead can be shared.

## Withdrawing Support

*Vintage Communities'* pilot sites have achieved social change led by local people, with little or no involvement from formal institutions. Individuals from the local communities developed their project according to their aspirations and at their own pace. In practice, this led to an inability to plan too far ahead as well as necessitating a longer period of time than originally anticipated. The organic development of networks and trusting relationships takes time. The initial offer from *Vintage Communities* was a six month period; this was extended to twelve months. However this was seen by the majority, if not all, of the participants to still be too short. Community building of this type requires time, patience and perseverance – however, this also highlights the need for a more structured and staged reduction of involvement by *Vintage Communities*.

Due to the necessary investment in communities, relationships built throughout this process between *Vintage Communities* and the local people were long standing and of a personal, as opposed to professional, nature. This necessitated a more flexible approach by the practitioners, changing the ways in which they worked according to the requirements of the situation. Although this is positive, it had a counter-effect when it was necessary for *Vintage's* involvement to be reduced. This greatly affected the confidence of the group in one of the areas, who raised concerns over the sustainability of the group without their direct leadership. This reemphasises the requirement for a structured and staged reduction of involvement by *Vintage Communities*.

Regarding the necessity for a more structured reduction of involvement, *Vintage Communities* has suggested that in the future, developments should include local community connectors in each of the areas who would have local knowledge and pre-established trust with local citizens who could offer mentoring and support for the core group, on a longer lasting, personal level. The community builders would liaise with *Vintage Communities* and forge lasting relationships within the localities which could be maintained and developed further. We also suggest that low-level involvement of time banks, if

available in the area might be useful. As Martin Simmons of Nurture Development suggested in an interview, time-banking which set up an exchange system to help organise people and organisations to continue to develop community connections<sup>5</sup>.

*Key lessons: Withdrawing support*

- 1. Withdrawing support from a community development project based on personal ties rather than professional relationships needs to be evaluated as ending a **personal relationship**. Individuals who have invested a lot of trust and effort into their relationship with practitioners can feel left behind and may lack confidence. Community development of this type requires time, patience and perseverance, so practitioners should introduce a **more structured and staged devolvement**.*
- 2. It is important for ABCD practitioners not only to build confidence in the community but also to ensure that this will not wither away in their absence. Individuals should be directed to **low levels of support** provided by the wider ABCD network.*
- 3. A **cooperative model**, suggested by Vintage Communities, where individuals are involved in writing their constitution might provide the right structure for projects to continue to grow.*
- 4. ABCD practitioners should also consider working closely with **timebanking** schemes where available, or seek to involve local businesses as a way to incentivise community involvement.*

## **What change has it made?**

We asked the individuals involved in some capacity with *Vintage Communities* the extent to which they witnessed or experienced change as a result of the project. Great variety of opinions among the interviewees is apparent.

### *Joy of life*

For some, the most prominent change consisted of fundamental personal development, gaining confidence and empowerment to facilitate change in their local community. However, for others, change came in a form as simple as a Christmas gathering providing a '*fill-up on life*'.

### *Lasting friendships and connections*

---

<sup>5</sup> Timebanking is a system in which time is the principal currency and every individual's time is valued equally. Time spent supporting others can be banked and then withdrawn at a time when they themselves might be in need of support. One model developed by Spice also includes the private sector, allowing individuals to claim their time to participate in social activities of their choice, such as at the cinema, theatre, museums, etc. Linking individuals with existing timebanking arrangements, or setting up smaller timebanks within communities will not only involve individuals but also foster local economy.

The social benefits of the events were clearly recognised by the participants, with many enjoying meeting new people with shared interests and forming lasting friendships or connections. Many of the interviewees reported feeling less detached from the community as a result of the project, becoming aware of what is available within their communities and enjoying the opportunity to use their own experience to help others feel less isolated.

### *Feeling valued*

For one participant, interacting with local councillors in a more informal environment was greatly significant as it enabled recognition of their concerns and issues to take place, resulting in the realisation that they were indeed a valued member of the community as opposed to an isolated individual. By valuing the skills and contributions of all participants, a transformation in people's confidence has been reported by their neighbours through the recognition of the skills that they have to offer. However, it is not realistic for the project to eliminate social isolation and loneliness of older people from society entirely in one year, and this was not its aim. However, through the events of the projects inclusive connections were made, enabling people to play a positive, active role within their local community.

### *Overcoming stereotypes*

Inclusivity is stated by *Vintage Communities* as being a key aim in this project, aiming to draw people from the margins of society into the community. A key change noted in a variety of forms by the interviewees is overcoming preconceived ideas and stereotypes of groups within society. This was facilitated through working with people who the participants would not usually come into contact with. For example, the projects provided the opportunity for interaction with young people at the colleges and people from different cultural or political backgrounds, such as the young mothers involved in the ESOL classes and councillors. Through these shared experiences and contact dialogue was facilitated, enabling the development of an inclusive, more cohesive community.

This development regarding inclusivity can be concerning differing political backgrounds. Certainly local authority representatives initially had reservations about the development of party politics within the projects, creating divisions among the members of society that *Vintage* was trying to bring together. This is despite the aim of *Vintage* to remain outside of statutory bodies and maintain independence from political parties. In contrast to this, a participant reported that as a result of their involvement they realised their capacity to work with members of the opposition party, finding shared values through working in collaboration on shared projects.

### *Moving towards a citizens' council*

An initial challenge observed from the perspective of local authorities was to change the way people thought about their community and the council itself. It was felt by some representatives that this change was indeed achieved through the project, with people gaining an understanding of the degree

of control that they have around their local environment, thereby empowering them to become active citizens. Indeed one participant reported that an ongoing dialogue was taking place between the group and the local Parks Department for Improvement about the acquisition of a greater number of benches. Despite the fact that this has not yet led to change, it conveys that citizens are becoming aware of services that can be accessed and finding like-minded people to facilitate change in the locality as well as the confidence to affect this change. This empowerment moves away from a paternalistic relationship between the council and the community, to a relationship or dialogue on more equal terms.

### *Reflection*

The level of personal change experienced will greatly vary depending upon the individual, with various contributing factors including past experiences, internal mechanisms and the level of their involvement. Some will leave the process unchanged, whilst others will have personally gained maturity and developed as a result of their experiences. Others will not get involved at all, which in itself is a valid choice. On the simplest level, positive change from the project is about individuals connecting on a personal level, such as through new opportunities for conversations.

## **Challenges and opportunities**

We asked participants involved with *Vintage Communities* whether there were any particular challenges that the project faced and what methods or changes in approach were necessary to overcome them. The issues considered most pertinent in both areas included communication, size, background knowledge and conflicting aims and expectations.

### *Improving communications*

Communications was identified as a major issue in both wards, with a fundamental challenge being ensuring that everyone has access to information about upcoming events and the project itself.

To overcome this in Bedford a digital platform has been developed by the group to be launched which includes a website, email address, and street life page. Further to this, a newsletter is circulated with a round-up of past and upcoming events, including their own logo. Throughout the project the time-consuming nature of working with social media was noted, and so this was seen as not the most effective method of communicating with the intended recipients.

In Eastbrook, only a very small proportion of citizens had access to, or were active users of the internet. The most effective form of communication in this area was talking to individuals either face to face, by knocking on doors, or via telephone. Currently they are working to build a 'telephone-grapevine' to inform each other about upcoming events.

We also suggest that contact and communication with statutory bodies as well as community and voluntary organisations may help to reach a greater number and diversity of people. Investment in these pre-existing services could potentially greatly improve outcomes around digital inclusion, especially for the most isolated in society.

### *Reducing size*

A key issue highlighted by citizens in both of the pilot sites was the size of the ward over which the project takes place. Both wards covered consisted of approximately 55 streets in total. This was felt by some to be too large, due to mobility issues. Many participants expressed that it was vital for them to be able to reach their destination with a short walk, or alternatively using accessible transport.

A smaller sized area serves a secondary purpose in the initial stages of the process, when it is vital that participants are able to walk around the area, developing relationships with neighbours and understanding of neighbourhoods within the locality. Through this, local background knowledge can be gained.

### *Prior local knowledge*

Local knowledge was considered vital for project development in both areas, which was seen to be lacking to varying extents according to individuals' accounts. This local knowledge on a geographical level would enable the quick identification of vital sources of information, such as libraries and community connectors within society from which a core group and a potential network could be developed. In addition, one participant highlighted the importance of understanding the area regarding potential political aspects, due to the involvement of local councillors which could potentially lead to a level of disengagement.

### *Increasing interface with local institutions*

It has been noted that in order to add impetus to and supplement the organic development of networks, *Vintage* was able to act, in part, as the initiator and connector with local associations and resources. However in order to become increasingly self-sustainable, it has been noted by participants that the interface with other organisations and connections within the local community needs to be improved. It was suggested that this was due to the fact that initially many other associations within the community saw the project as direct competition to their work, as opposed to being for their mutual benefit. Through expanding and embedding the developed networks and forging links with connectors within different communities in the locality, full use of the untapped resources can be realised.

Therefore, greater utilisation of existing bodies, including housing, care and support can help to reach wider sections of society and fulfil inclusive aims. Furthermore, their networks to identify connectors

would not compete with but compliment the ABCD approach, as many leading organisations in our sector are now moving towards coproduced and citizen-led services.

### *Money matters*

Finance and funding posed a key challenge to both areas. It is clear that a financial contribution, however small, is important, not only to start the project but to make it sustainable. By utilising and capitalising upon already existing resources within the community, costs can be kept at a minimum. However financial backing is necessary for general administrative tasks such as photocopying and printing as well as advertising, for which the core members should not be relied upon. A proposed solution is, where possible, to use the project itself to produce a product and fundraise to enhance sustainability. Alternatively, greater guidance could be given on the structure necessary to apply for future funding by external supporting bodies, whether this guidance is given by *Vintage Communities* or otherwise.

Through establishing links with bodies such as the Chambers of Commerce in the area, a dialogue with a greater number of businesses within the area could be facilitated, bringing sustainable funding to campaign, raise awareness and fund various activities. Alternatively, a timebanking model can be adopted as an incentive for individuals to continue to take part in community activities, in exchange for enjoyable leisure time.

## Take away messages for housing, care and support sectors

### *Linking housing, care and health for strong communities*

Our study has found the Vintage Communities' ABCD approach was effective in bringing older people together, fostering lasting friendships and consequently reducing social isolation and improving health and wellbeing of older people. There is ample evidence in the literature that building informal networks around reduces the need for statutory services and in this way, savings to public's purse can be made. This opportunity has been recognised by Adult Social Care commissioners already, and in one area the involvement of Health and Wellbeing Boards is much encouraging.

Sitra believes it is now time for housing associations and charities that provide general or specialised housing to get involved. Vintage Communities had contacted three housing organisations, one large, one small and one specialist for Polish communities, yet in each case, the initial enthusiasm has quickly deteriorated. We know from our membership base that housing with care and support sector has been leading the way in service user involvement, delivering personalised support, promoting co-production of services, and ABCD is just the next step to recognise resource and utilise individuals' expertise in *not just services but in wider community*. There are already some initiatives such as May Day Trust, which works with younger people who are at risk or leaving care, and Bromford Support which involves a multitude of client groups, including older people, people with learning difficulties, and people with mental health problems. Marc Mordey's response to housing sector, in Appendix 1, explains the ways in which housing can help foster community links.

The recent Sitra report, examining the lived experience of individuals who had left a housing related support service 12 months ago and exploring what communities need in place to ensure individuals are able to sustain outcomes achieved in the service in longer term, have highlighted that one of the most prominent outcomes for services individuals' ability to develop their social networks. Positive relationships between former clients, their families and other organisations in the community were important in establishing a safety net for individuals in times of need as well as increasing feelings of belonging and connectedness. This support was required at crucial points after exit from services to make sure individuals are equipped well enough to maintain independent living, and where this was not provided, there were very real and immediate consequences for individuals. The community connections alone constituted a significant proportion of the social return of investment in housing related support services, yielding approximately £55M social value over three years (with no 'cost of investment' from participants). Housing related support organisations that actively take part in ABCD approaches are likely to increase the number and quality of connections and are consequently likely to create more social value.

We also recognise that ABCD approach, with its premises around building informal networks around individuals and complementing, rather than, substituting formal institutions present a sincere opportunity for bridging the seemingly separate islands of health, housing and care. Housing and housing support providers in every local authority area should strategically engage with health partners via Health and Wellbeing Boards to ensure their contribution to community development are fully recognised and integrated. The ideal time for this is when the boards are assessing their needs and priorities for the year(s) ahead and are preparing their Joint Strategic Needs Assessments and Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategies.

### *Expanding the reach of ABCD approach*

The wider shift in the local and central Government's priorities have widely shifted towards addressing older people's needs in the recent years meant that Vintage Communities' work has mostly focused on the community development around and among older people. Older citizens involved have commented on how the friendships or connections they have built throughout the project will have a lasting effect on their lives, giving them a peace of mind with the knowledge that they have someone to ask for support in times of need. They also commented the project has given them a purpose, shaped them as contributors to greater societal aims and as a result they feel as valuable members of the society. These achievements are admirable for anyone, young and old, wealthy and poor, healthy or with support needs.

Our literature review has demonstrated that the origins of ABCD approach lies within the capacity building among 'troubled communities' in urban centres in 1960s USA. Our local and contemporary rhetoric around 'broken society' or 'troubled families' clearly resonates with these early writings, and if only one message was to be taken away from the literature, would be *significant change that lasts cannot be achieved with an intervention based on needs, but can only derive from centring views, experiences and assets of individuals, who live so called 'troubled lives' in so called 'troubled places'*. We therefore urge commissioners of Adult Social Care Services and housing to consider involving ABCD practitioners, such as Vintage Communities, to develop their offer of support for these individuals.

Expanding the reach of ABCD projects to programmes such as 'Troubled Families' might mean that ABCD practitioners will be likely to work within PBR contracts, being paid to the amount of achievements they have been able to deliver in a set period of time. There are two risks with this approach:

*One is 'hitting the target but missing the point'*: Commissioners and ABCD practitioners may agree on outcomes they would like to achieve, but there should also be a recognition of the developmental, citizen led nature of the project to avoid any attempt at 'cherry-picking', i.e. working with easier to engage citizens. There needs to be a balance between developing the project at the pace of the



people involved, and delivering sustainable outcomes identified by commissioners. Therefore transparency is vital.

*The second is 'delivering outcomes in set times':* ABCD practitioners, like Vintage Communities have an understandable fondness of 'organic growth'- but our study investigating reflective diaries and consulting citizens found this is a slow process, impeding in the project's ability to demonstrate large scale involvement. This can be overcome by involving existing formal institutions, along with informal networks, in community development work. Many housing associations, support and care providers are looking for opportunities to develop their offer of support networks around their clients: Equal partnership with them would be beneficial for both ABCD practitioners and individuals requiring housing, care and support.

### *ABCD should be seen as complementary but not a substitute to public services*

Our interviews with ABCD practitioners and commissioners have highlighted that for many, ABCD was interpreted in a larger framework of Big Society. Many accepted that previously statutory or publicly funded services will not be available in the future as a consequence of austerity measures and suggested that communities can help to substitute these gaps. However, our study demonstrates this is not quite the case- instead, any attempts to develop communities around vulnerable individuals require a clear engagement with already existing services, including schools, libraries, social housing, hostels and hospitals to identify connectors to involve the most entrenched populations. Commissioners, councillors and project leaders should not underestimate the power of 'grapevine'. Most individuals hear about the project from their local connectors. This means in practice, an ABCD project that aims to reach individuals who do not necessarily interact with their neighbours, should try to establish connectors in a multitude of locations, for example, schools to involve children, colleges and workplaces to involve young people, local outreach teams to involve homeless people, and so forth.

Furthermore, there is ample evidence in our sector, such as St Mungos and Broadway's experience in their learning programme based in Portland, Oregon and San Francisco, California, that in the absence of adequate structures and formal support, there is a risk of propagating systematic exclusion of individuals with various needs, including but especially homeless people and people with disabilities. The social structures, such as the welfare state, NHS and social housing are critical in both identifying and meeting these needs. While we recognise that the voluntary organisations based on donations and individuals' commitment are not adequate to provide all the support individuals might need, individuals and communities will need to be involved in identifying where the gaps are, thinking creatively about how to fill the gaps and asking for investment where they might need help. In sum, ABCD should be viewed as complementary but not as a substitute of the offering of welfare state.

## References

- Breatherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2014). *An Evaluation of the Broadway Skills Exchange Time Bank*. Retrieved from <http://www.york.ac.uk/media/chp/documents/2014/Broadway%20Time%20Bank%20Final%20Report%201%20May%202014.pdf>
- Cattan, M., White, M., Bond, J. & Learmouth, A. (2005). Preventing social isolation and loneliness: A systematic review of health promotion interventions. *Aging and Society*, 25:1, 41 -67.
- Cummins, J. and Miller, C. (2007). *Co-production, social capital and service effectiveness*. London: OPM.
- Davis, H. & Ritters, K. (2009). *LinkAge Plus national evaluation: End of project report*. Department for Work and Pensions. Retrieved from [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/186771/rrep572.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/186771/rrep572.pdf)
- Hatton, C., Waters, J. & Routledge, R. (2013). *National Personal Budgets Survey 2013*. Think Local Act Personal. Retrieved from [http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/\\_library/POETSummaryFINAL.pdf](http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/_library/POETSummaryFINAL.pdf)
- Health Empowerment Leverage Project. (2011). *Empowering Communities for Health: Business Case and Practice Framework*. Retrieved from [http://www.healthempowerment.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/DH\\_report\\_Nov\\_2011.pdf](http://www.healthempowerment.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/DH_report_Nov_2011.pdf)
- Jenkins, R., Meltzer, H., Jones, P., Brugha, T., Bebbington, P., Farrell, M., Crepaz-Keay, D., Knapp, M. (2008). *Mental Health: future challenges*. London: The Government Office for Science. Retrieved from [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/32763/1/\\_\\_\\_Libfile\\_repository\\_Content\\_Knapp,%20M\\_Mental%20health%20future%20challenges\\_Mental\\_health%20future%20challenges%20\(LSE%20RO\).pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/32763/1/___Libfile_repository_Content_Knapp,%20M_Mental%20health%20future%20challenges_Mental_health%20future%20challenges%20(LSE%20RO).pdf)
- Kelbie, P. (2008, June 22). Boscastle reborn as a green beacon. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2008/jun/22/flooding.weather>

- Kennedy, S. and Thorpe, A. (2010). *The problems of British Society*. Retrieved from <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/key-issues-for-the-new-parliament/social-reform/broken-britain/>
- Klee, D. (2009). *Getting on well together: Councils working with older people*. I&DeA and LGA Group. Retrieved from <http://www.rcpa.org.uk/MyFiles/Files/Downloads%20Misc/IDeA%20-%20Getting%20on%20well%20together,%20councils%20working%20with%20older%20people.pdf>
- Klee, D. (2014). *ABCD Handbook for social workers*. Unpublished at time of writing.
- Kretzmann, J., & McKnight, J. (1993). *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Evanston, IL: Center for urban Affairs and Policy Research.
- McNeil, C. (2012). *Responding to 'Listening to troubled families'*. IPPR. Retrieved from <http://www.ippr.org/news-and-media/press-releases/responding-to-listening-to-troubled-families>
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. (2008). Community engagement. *NICE public health guidance 9*. Retrieved from <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph9/resources/guidance-community-engagement-pdf>
- Putnam, R. (1995). Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6:1, 65-78.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Russel, C. (2011) The Anatomy of an Asset Based Community Builder. *Nature Development*. Retrieved from [http://issuu.com/cormac\\_russell/docs/the\\_anatomy\\_of\\_an\\_asset\\_based\\_community\\_builder](http://issuu.com/cormac_russell/docs/the_anatomy_of_an_asset_based_community_builder)
- Slatter, P. (2011). *Coproduction in Practice: 6 Case Studies of Coproduction in the West Midlands*. Chamberlain Forum. Retrieved from <http://www.chamberlainforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Coproduction-in-Practice-Report.pdf>
- Wightman, C. (2011) *Connecting People: The steps to making it happen*. Foundation for people with Learning Disabilities. Retrieved from

<http://www.grapevinecovandwarks.org/media/11298/connecting%20people%20-%20for%20web%20and%20email.pdf>

## Appendix- Marc Mordey's Response: Housing and ABCD

**Asset Based Community Development - underpinning the foundations of housing?** Asset Based Community Development thrives in the medium of storytelling ; so here is one from me. Why the sausage machine got blocked.

In the early 1980's I worked for a homelessness organisation and we had a kind of 'sausage machine' mentality about people who came to our night shelter door, with nowhere to live and precious little hope to sustain them.

We would bring them in and offer 'Tender Loving Care', practical support for example, sorting out benefits, linking to statutory agencies, contacting their families, and offering as much support and encouragement as we could. If they chose to stay with us a while we would then offer them the chance to move on into a 'halfway house' where there was a worker, Monday to Friday, 9am - 5pm to offer support and care. Stage 3 was to move on into a shared flat with maybe one or 2 other residents and some occasional visits from a housing worker. And stage 4? Why, the key to their own front door - usually in a flat or bedsit in one of the poorer, more out of town council estates....there, job done! No longer homeless, no longer needing support - independent and self sufficient and ready to face the world again.

And then, to our surprise - sometimes a few days, a number of weeks later, even after months - the vast majority of the people we had 'moved on' returned to the night shelter door ; having relinquished their tenancy, gone back on the booze, wandered to another city ; whatever. The 'sausage machine' was blocked, and - in many cases - had broken down completely.

One day, in a state of communal despair, as a team of people dedicated to reducing homelessness and helping people back into independence, we sat around the table in our night shelter and tried to work out what was going wrong ; why were our residents 'failing'? Our team included trained social workers, people with a range of housing related experience, graduates - all unified by a genuine heartfelt desire to combat something, namely homelessness and its related conditions, that we all felt constituted a social evil of sorts. We theorised, agonised, exasperated ourselves and one another, went through a massive list of possible explanations for these apparent failures...then, a new colleague quietly posed a simple question: "Did we ever ask the guys what they wanted?"

And, of course, we had to acknowledge that, well, no we had not, not really - we just assumed that this was what people who found themselves to be homeless would want, because, that's what everyone wants isn't it? Furthermore, if we were really honest, we had actually taken the decision that "we knew what they needed...."

And, in truth, we had failed to recognise that as human beings none of us are really independent, we are inter dependent, sustained by the network of friends, families, colleagues, neighbours that, ideally, are there to protect, enrich, save, nurture and value us. And all too often we had unwittingly abandoned the people using our services to a kind of 'No Man's Land'. Yes, they had their own place, but precious little besides. We had set the destination for them, not asked them where it was they wanted to go, and how they felt they might get there.

Setting the Sat Nav to the citizen led route.

My colleague's simple, yet fundamental, question was, for me at least, a Damascus Road type experience and led me into thinking about and ultimately acting upon the various initiatives - badged alternatively as , for example, 'service user involvement', 'tenant participation', 'empowerment,' 'co production' , 'experts by experience' ... The list goes on.

I realised that I needed to ask people where they wanted to get to, and the see how I could assist them in that endeavour. I came to believe that the essential point is that, on the whole, people know best what is going to work for them to their greater advantage. And that as human beings we both want and need to control our own destinies, and indeed, destinations, as much as we possibly can. And I have tried to work on that principle ever since.

A lot further down my own road I came across the concept and - more importantly - the practice of Asset Based Community Development or 'ABCD' and here is where I think this relates to housing. I strenuously ,maintain that housing managers and providers could and should act is upon the need to further integrate the people we house into their communities.

Community engagement is the corner piece

Housing, shelter - of a decent quality, affordable, appropriate - is a critical human need and a pivotal part of how we maintain ourselves and those we love and know within our various communities. Be that owner occupied, rented, Extra Care, sheltered, single occupancy or any other form of housing, without it you or I are less likely to be able to flourish and grow in the world we live in. Decent housing should be a right - it is most definitely a privilege.

In the work we (*Vintage Communities*) completed, which this SITRA evaluation has explored and made sense of for us, we came to recognise more and more that whilst housing is of immense importance, a house (flat, room, whatever) can also be little more than a cage, a trap - be that gilded or otherwise. And we saw far too many people stuck inside a building unable, possibly unwilling, to get out and engage with their communities, their neighbours, their friends.

In privately owned housing, short of literally knocking on people's front doors and hoping that they might answer, we were at the mercy of the willingness or otherwise of the individual to engage with us and the citizens who became involved in our activity. However, 'social housing' we feel should provide a different opportunity. Here we are lucky enough to encounter individuals (housing managers, floating support workers and so on) as well as groupings (residents/tenants associations) who have a perfect 'in' to be able to talk to tenants and encourage them to share their gifts of the heart, hands, head.

At a recent meeting of housing providers, I heard people talking a good deal about how housing gets overlooked or ignored, be that by NHS colleagues, by social care providers, by employers, those working within the criminal justice sector and so on. I have a deal of sympathy and a shared experience with that viewpoint. But maybe something that we, as 'housing people' can and all too often do, is share with our colleagues from other professions and disciplines. We can also be guilty of overlooking the value of and need for 'our' people (tenants, residents, users, however they might be defined) to be full members of the communities we place them in. Be those geographical communities or communities of interest, I know I have often neglected to consider how best those folks can become a part of the neighbourhood they live in, and be seen as important and useful members thereof.

We have a need it seems for according labels to people, and so we might provide 'housing for offenders, for people living with dementia, for homeless people, for substance misuse, for families, for single people, for people with Learning Disabilities' etc. And we may well, be it consciously, deliberately or much more subliminally, see those people first and foremost as having needs that we, as housing providers have to help fulfil. Rather than seeing people as having assets, ideas, gifts and capabilities that they can apply and offer, if given the chance to do so.

To use Cormac Russell's phrase, all too often "we see what is wrong, not what is strong". Furthermore, as Cormac often also will say, "Needs analysis, needs analysis."!

We need more grease monkeys

So how can we, as housing people, help to build, strengthen and maintain the communities in which we place people?

I often describe the work of *Vintage Communities*, as that of being grease monkeys. We are not there to build the neighbourhood machinery - it already exists. Our role is to inject a squirt of oil here, a dab of grease there - to help lubricate something that has been around for ages, though has possibly got a little rusty or has even seized up. The engineers, the mechanics, the people who know how best the machine might work in the future are all there, they are in place but they might not be as well connected as they could be. If we can oil the wheels of community, then those wheels will surely turn and run true. And housing practitioners and managers are in a very good position to lend a hand to the pump.

And the people we house and care for, support and encourage, well it might be they need a little, and sometimes a lot of motivating and maintaining (just like everyone else does!) but, beyond a shadow of a doubt, they have as much and more to give as anyone else living in their street, their block, their home.

ABCD is a means to offering more than a key to your own front door - it has the potential to unlock so much more, what's out there, as well as what's in here.

<http://www.Vintagecommunities.co.uk/blog/blogs/blog1.php/grease-monkeys-needed-housing-and>