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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how asset-based community development (ABCD) can be used to build inclusive, connected communities that intentionally value the contribution of older citizens.

Design/methodology/approach – ABCD was used as an approach to enable older people to transform their neighbourhood and make them a better place to live for all ages. The paper describes this approach and goes on to illustrate how it has been applied in three neighbourhoods using case studies.

Findings – The case studies show that by using ABCD, connections can be made between people, associations/clubs, businesses and services, to achieve the aspirations the citizens have for their neighbourhood. The contribution of older citizens to community life is valued and the risk of isolation and loneliness reduced.

Originality/value – The three case studies presented in this paper are unique in that they have applied ABCD with older people taking on the role of community builders and connectors.

Keywords Community building, Integration, Older people, Loneliness, Demographic change, Intergenerational

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Asset-based community development (ABCD) has its origins in North America where Professors John McKnight and Jody Kretzman and their faculty and associates have successfully applied an approach to create more connected and caring communities. In the late 1980s over the course of four years McKnight and Kretzman along with 18 associates travelled across North America, visiting over 300 neighbourhoods in 20 cities. The majority of these neighbourhoods were defined as “backwaters of pathology”, previously studies for their problems and deficits. Contrary to the traditional mode of research, they collected 3,000 stories demonstrating the success of this approach and published *Building communities from the Inside Out: A Path Towards Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets* in 1993 (McKnight and Kretzmann, 1993). In 1995 the International Asset Based Community Development Institute was formed to support practitioners of ABCD, first across the USA and Canada and then worldwide.

The term an “asset-based approach” has become popular in health and social care in the UK in recent years. The reasons for this are:

- the former social contract of exclusively state provided services is no longer viable in the current economic climate;
- people are living longer and the proportion of older people will increase significantly in the next decade and beyond;
- people want to make decisions about what is important to them, their family and their community – rather than the state making decisions for them;

the health and wellbeing risks of loneliness and isolation are being recognised and there is a need to address this; and

there is an increasing recognition that place-based responses are critical to ensuring people can age well close to home.

The past Government and the current Coalition Government have both supported person-centred and citizen led approaches in their policies (Department of Health (DH), 2007, 2010). The Care Act 2014 requires councils to “consider what services, facilities and resources are already in the area and how these might help local people” (Department of Health).

Sustainable Social Services for Wales: A Framework for Action (2011) says, “We will support and strengthen people’s ability to contribute as individuals within their own networks and communities supporting each other.”

Service models that fit with an asset-based approach are becoming popular including Time banks, co-production and village agents (see www.villageagents.org.uk/). Circles, a service model provided by Participle and others has been used in many areas to provide reciprocal support amongst older people (by way of example see – www.theguardian.com/society/2012/sep/04/circle-model-adult-social-care). For a small annual membership fee, older people can get help from one another with practical tasks and extend their social network.

This paper is about how ABCD enabled older people to transform their neighbourhoods in three London boroughs, Croydon, Wandsworth and Barking and Dagenham.

It starts with a description of ABCD, then outlines why this approach was used to improve the quality of life of older people with them and their neighbours as primary change agents. We demonstrate how it worked in practice with three case studies. The paper shares key learning and ends with implications for practice.

ABCD

ABCD is about citizens identifying, connecting and using the assets of a community. It starts with the dreams people have for themselves and their community, then at a more personal level people identify the skills they have as local residents to make those dreams come true – what skills and experience do they have that can be shared with others. These are sometimes described as “gifts”, the gifts of the head – knowledge, the heart – caring, and hands – practical skills. In the UK people are not very forthcoming when asked what skills or talents they have and so need to be encouraged in different ways. Sometimes we ask – “what would others say you are good at?”

I have asked a group of older people who have met several times before, to say what they value in the other person. Everyone has something to contribute, it may be a task that they take for granted such as knitting, making cakes or basic DIY, but these are not skills that everyone has.

We then look at what the neighbourhood has to offer, where are the clubs, associations, churches, schools and other meeting places? Are there parks, libraries, shops? Together with a group of people from the area we map what is in the neighbourhood. We use a large map and stickers to do this. The groups that we have worked with are always amazed at what is in their neighbourhood that they did not know about.

Once the group know what they already have, they can start making connections between people and places to achieve the things that they want for their neighbourhood and they do with great success, as our case studies will show.

The idea is simple, but getting to this point takes time and patience, as first a group of citizens need to be found who know the neighbourhood and are good at relationship building. We call these citizens, “connectors”. It may take some time to get together a group of willing connectors that represent the diversity of the community.

The neighbourhood needs to be recognisable to the group and reflect the boundaries that they perceive and be a place they have affinity for; these will not necessarily match the council boundaries. Ideally it should cover an area that can be walked by the community builders. A population of between 3,000 and 5,000 per neighbourhood is ideal.
The connectors meet with people living in the area to find out what they can contribute, what they would like to get involved in and ideas they have for making the neighbourhood a better place to live. They also meet with people who run businesses, shops, clubs, associations, church leaders and teachers, to have similar conversations. What are the clubs and associations already doing in the community? What would they like to get involved in and what can they offer?

Over time the asset map of the neighbourhood becomes richer and richer as information is added and connections are made. People come together to work on things that are important to them, valuing the contribution that each person makes and using the resources of the community.

This approach is led by citizens, they decide what they want to do, how to do it and when. A community builder is needed to enable the process but they must always follow the citizens’ lead, gently supporting and facilitating.

The steps of ABCD could be summarised as follows but the sequence of these will differ and they are by no means a formula, as each neighbourhood will be different:

- Identify a neighbourhood where there is a welcome for this work among a core group of local residents and the opportunity for local sponsors. It needs to be a small enough area for people to travel easily from one end to the other.
- Find connectors – people who are good at networking and talk easily to others.
- Identify people’s cares, dreams, skills and interests.
- Map the clubs, associations, schools, churches, etc. – use a big street map to identify what is in the neighbourhood.
- Meet with clubs, associations, church leaders, teachers, etc. – find out what they are already doing, what they would like to see happen and what they can offer.
- Identify some projects that people would like to get involved in to make the neighbourhood a better place to live.
- Bring together people, clubs associations and other neighbourhood resources to achieve these aspirations.
- Share successes and encourage others in the neighbourhood to get involved.

The benefits of ABCD in including and valuing older people

The population in the UK is ageing as people are living longer. The number of people aged 85 years and over is projected to rise from 1.3 million in 2007 to 3.3 million in 2033 (Blood, 2013).

As people live longer there will be a greater likelihood of them developing a long-term condition. There is already evidence of this in the high number of older people living with dementia. The high percentage of older people with care needs will put pressure on statutory services such as health and social care. The House of Lords Select Committee on Demographic Change (2013) concluded that public services couldn’t keep up with the growing demand.

In contrast to this fear of an increased demand on services there is evidence that people aged 65 and over are making a significant contribution to the economy and are a valuable asset. The WRVS (2011) calculated that older people made a positive net contribution to the UK economy in 2010 of £40 billion more than they receive in state pensions, welfare and health services. The formal and informal voluntary services that older people provide to their community are worth over £10 million a year.

Some older people, particularly those over the age of 85 years will need help and support to remain independent. The “Little bit of help”, described by the “Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Paynes et al., 2008) that can enable a person to remain living independently at home is rarely provided by social services as spending on adult social care has steadily decreased since 2005 (Age UK, 2012).

Prevention is better than cure, Cormac Russell (2011) describes the current scenario of ambulances at the bottom of a cliff, instead of fences at the top as the way in which we sometimes do business in supporting older people in health and social care. He says that
“[…] with older people in the lead, families, communities and agencies can co-create better fences before the precipice, and ensure that a good life is nurtured well before people reach the ‘edge’.”

Older people offer a wealth of experience, talent and knowledge that is a tremendous asset to their communities (Bowers et al., 2013). Those older people that do need “a little bit of help”, are much more comfortable with an arrangement where there is a mutual sharing and exchange (Bowers et al., 2013). Everyone, whatever their condition has something to offer that is of value to someone else. Sharing these “gifts” helps to make people feel valued by their neighbours and included.

Social isolation and loneliness is experienced by many older people. A survey by Age UK found that 10 per cent of adults over the age of 65 years feel lonely often or all of the time. Just over one in ten felt cut off from society. Almost a third said they wanted to go out more often and two in ten (41 per cent) said that their TV or pet was their main form of company (Age UK, May 2013).

There are health risks associated with loneliness, for example a lack of social connections is a comparable risk factor to an early death, as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad and Layton, 2010).

Putnam (2000) found that participation in a group cuts an older person’s chance of dying in the next year by a half and joining two groups cuts the risk by 75 per cent.

The changing demographics of an ageing population; the growing demand for care services that can no longer be provided by adult social care; the tremendous asset of skills, experience, knowledge and care provided by older people; a wish for reciprocal support and mutual exchange; and the need to prevent social isolation and loneliness by including and valuing everyone’s contribution to the community; taken together these make a strong case for ABCD.

The three case studies outlined in this paper were aimed at including and valuing older people and reducing isolation and loneliness. However, they were inclusive involving all ages within the community, in fact several of the projects were intergenerational, bringing young and old together to share skills and experience.

Case studies

The case studies were delivered by Nurture Development in association with Croydon CVS (Thornton Heath) and commissioned by Croydon Council and Vintage Communities CiC (Balham and Rush Green), commissioned by Wandsworth Council and Barking and Dagenham Council, respectively.

I love Thornton Heath

Description

Commissioned by NHS Croydon, Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA) delivered this ABCD pilot project in Thornton Heath, one of Croydon’s most deprived wards. Working with three other voluntary sector partners, CVA was given the unique opportunity of being mentored in ABCD methodology by Nurture Development – with a two-day practical training course held at the start of the project. The project brief was to “promote participation in social networks and strengthen social connectedness among people aged 50-70 to improve their health and wellbeing”.

What took place

The project stuck closely to the six stepping stones of community building – finding community connectors; mapping assets; identifying community building themes; building connections; identifying match funds; and community planning. The work produced an “actioning of ideas” falling within four categories:

- Intergenerational – with the emphasis on developing initiatives for young people.
- Healthy lifestyle activities – ensuring that older people play a part in their own health and wellbeing.
- **Coming together to celebrate Thornton Heath** – creating opportunities to socialise, celebrate and share space with each other; articulating concerns, finding solutions and accessing associations.
- **Strategic intervention** – becoming involved in consultation events aimed at improving service delivery around social and health care.

**What was achieved**

Becoming part of a network of local people working to improve their area has translated into a mobilisation of assets under the four chosen themes, resulting in the emergence of new activities including:

- **Parents support project** – older people developing activities and support networks for parents with young children in the area.
- **School magazine** – article on intergenerational lunch bringing pupils and older members of the community together.
- **Employment and Education for young people** – Thornton Heath Business Partnership members offering conflict resolution, mentoring, work experience and training advice in local schools.
- **Thornton Heath Rec Cricket Coaching Initiative** – coaching, umpiring and friendly matches for elders.
- **Thornton Heath Rec Active Walking Group** – group of elders from bowling club conducting walking site tours.
- **E.T.H.O.S Exercise Group** – ten-week programme for older people run by Active Lifestyles.
- **Making Tesco elder-friendly** – volunteers assisting older people to do their shopping; seated rest areas available; use of the store training room for healthy living classes.
- **Thornton Heath Festival** – a history tour and big clean project.

**Challenges and opportunities**

One of CVA’s community partners found the ABCD methodology challenging and it was agreed not to continue with their support. The task of recruiting community connectors – and supporting them in their roles – proved difficult for all partners at first, but with Nurture Development’s support this was overcome and a total of 32 connectors were supported on the project. By its end, the connectors were hosting a celebratory event – organising a showcase of the activities listed above.

**Sustainability/looking forward**

Two-and-a-half years after this project ended, its legacy remains strong. The activities listed above have grown and developed – for example the Thornton Heath Rec now forms part of an official walking site celebrating the area’s heritage. The connectors remain active and have increased their number. Since 2012, CVA has been able to continue providing varying levels of community building support – and at the time of writing there is the strong prospect of the local authority investing in another project to build on I Love Thornton Heath’s legacy.

**The Balham story**

**Description**

Vintage Communities was commissioned by the London Borough of Wandsworth to work with people who live and work in the Bedford ward of Balham, to make it a better place to live for all ages.

Vintage Communities plan was to work with local people for six to nine months, enabling them to establish self-sustaining initiatives that made use of what is already available in the area to achieve their goals.
What took place

Two facilitators from Vintage Communities first met with a small group of local people, who had been invited by two Local Authority Councillors in late September 2012, and were actively involved with the group up until October 2013, at which point, various people within the “core group” of the Neighbourhood Network took on the active running and coordination of the group.

About eight or nine people attended the first couple of meetings where ideas were shared. The group undertook some asset mapping of the physical resources in the area (green spaces, social clubs, faith centres, etc.). People present shared information about their gifts and talents, experience and knowledge. This core group has grown to a nucleus of a dozen or so people, and other neighbours have joined the meetings at different times.

Three open events took place to publicise the work of the group and to encourage others to get involved; one in March 2013, a second in June of that year and a third in the September (utilising, respectively, a local church hall, a street fair and a primary school). As a result of these events there are more than 80 people on the circulation list, who expressed an interest in volunteering and helping.

After about four months of meeting, the group named themselves Neighbourhood Network. They have a logo, an e-mail account, a Facebook page and are also supported by www.streetlife.com, (a social networking site), with the offer of a page for keeping the neighbourhood connected.

What was achieved

- A computer skills class (for older people) run in conjunction with Balham Library, Streetlife.com and Neighbourhood Network volunteers.
- An oral history project – with local schools participating, and led by group of volunteers.
- A social group at Wimborne House (sheltered housing scheme on Bedford Hill).

Challenges and opportunities experienced

It was quite a challenge to ensure effective communication with people – most of those who expressed an interest had e-mail (a few people were post/telephone contacts only). Information was sent out as widely as possible, but there was a degree of frustration within the group about not managing to “reach out” to everyone.

The area size – there are about 50 streets in this ward and it was evident that this was an extensive patch to cover.

There were opportunities to make stronger links with other community organisations, to improve communication, share resources and expertise.

Sustainability/looking forward

The Neighbourhood Network is now in the process of constituting itself more formally – a decision reached at the October 2013 meeting. Vintage Communities concluded their formal/hands-on involvement at that time but maintain contact with the Neighbourhood Network and encourage them to share their ideas and experiences with other groups of older people where Vintage Communities are enabling them to achieve similar things.

Eight months on from going it alone, the Neighbourhood Network is thriving. Regular neighbourhood coffee mornings are taking place and there are a number of new initiatives in the planning stage including, teaching English to parents of school children whose first language is not English and small group excursions around London using travel cards and attending free exhibitions and events.

Rush Green

Description

Barking and Dagenham Council commissioned Vintage Communities to work with residents in the Eastbrook ward of Dagenham, an area known locally by residents as Rush Green. This ward was chosen because it had the highest proportion of older residents.
Vintage Communities plan was to work with local people for six to nine months, enabling them to establish self-sustaining initiatives that make use of what is already available in the area to achieve their goals.

What took place?

Vintage Communities facilitators made contact with around thirty clubs, associations and organisations in the area to find out what they were already doing and what they would like to do, to make Rush Green a better place to live for all ages.

The facilitators found fourteen people who were interested in becoming involved and potentially taking on the role of connectors.

The Rush Green Tenants Association and the Sports and Social Club, where the tenant’s association met, provided good networks for reaching local people. Barking and Dagenham College is in close proximity to the Sports and Social Club and so two staff from the College became actively involved in the group, as they sought to improve the relationship between students and local people.

There were five meetings, the first were spent building a map of the facilities and resources in the area and the skills, experience and aspirations of the group. As ideas began to take shape the meetings were occupied with planning, for two events, the summer fete and then a “Getting to Know You”, fish and chip lunch.

What was achieved?

- The group wanted to improve facilities in their local park and so eight of the group met with a parks manager from the council and together they took a stroll around the park to discuss what needed to change. There was an opportunity to put in a bid for a couple of extra benches as a result.
- A stand at the Sports and Social Club summer fete to share information about future plans and encourage more volunteers.
- A “Getting to Know You” fish and chip lunch for 30 people, this was targeted at older people at risk of loneliness and isolated. The objectives were: to make people aware of what was going on in the area, to find out if there was anything else that they would like to see happen, and to find out how to make activities more accessible. People exchanged phone numbers, offered to go to activities with each other and to share lifts.
- A lunch and introduction day to the new facilities at the College, including a training session with students on using an i-pad.
- An information exchange network using telephone and e-mails to make people aware of events and activities that they could participate in, this included a telephone carol concert at Christmas and a Christmas party hosted by students at a local school.

Challenges and opportunities

Several members of the core group of older people that we worked alongside, had health problems and a few were also carers, this limited their capacity to get as involved as they would have liked to. Very few members of the group had access to the internet, and so communication was by telephone and the postal service.

The tenants’ associations in the area were well attended and there was an opportunity to connect these, which was achieved, by sharing information and ideas.

Sustainability/looking forward

The group did not have the confidence or the capacity (given the poor health of core members and caring responsibilities), to lead on the initiatives they had planned, when Vintage ceased their involvement after 12 months. Instead links were made with organisations that could lead on specific projects.
The Volunteer Bureau set up a “Get Together” for local people following on from the Getting to Know You lunch. A number of the group volunteered to help run the group.

A student from Barking and Dagenham College offered one to one sessions on using the computer at a set time each week at the college.

The Council agreed to receive and send on information on activities and events in the area through contacts from the group and the tenants association.

The tenant’s association key contacts agreed to meet on a regular basis to continue sharing ideas and information.

**Key learning**

Overall, this approach takes time and patience; time to build trusting relationships and patience to work at the pace of the citizens, following their lead.

It helps to have some knowledge of the area and/or to work with a local person who can take on the role of community builder.

The place that you are working in needs to be a neighbourhood that is recognised as such by the group. It may not fit with council boundaries or the requirements of the funder.

Community and voluntary organisations have a great deal to offer communities and are a valuable asset, but the starting point is: what do citizens want for the common good – from here community and voluntary organisations and others living and working in the neighbourhood can pool resources and work together to achieve these aspirations.

Every neighbourhood has a lot to offer, but it is only when citizens, clubs/associations, businesses and services come together to work to a common goal, that the true impact can be realised. What distinguishes ABCD from co-production is that the process is place based, grass roots, citizen-led, the role and resources of institutions are intentionally placed last, thereby ensuring that development comes from inside out, and is therefore sustainable over time.

**Conclusion**

All too often, older people are seen as a burden, the language sometimes employed is of “the demographic time bomb”, or “the silver tsunami” and other, far less complimentary epithets are applied. What we have learned (or perhaps more accurately, have had reinforced to us) from the work undertaken in these three areas, as described above, is that older people have more than enough to offer each other, their neighbours and their community’s economy and ecology. For many there is still plenty of energy and enthusiasm left for getting out and about within their neighbourhood, for sharing ideas and experiences and for conveying the knowledge and wisdom they have accumulated over the years; be that practical, intellectual or emotional (gifts of the hands, the head, the heart). Others find themselves unable to leave their homes and yet still have a brightness, a curiosity and an appetite for life, that it is so terribly easy to overlook, or to not even see at all.

ABCD cuts across the silos we create in service land and beyond – the bandings related to age, ability, sexuality, ethnicity and so on and so forth. Seeing people as, first and foremost, bearers of gifts, treasure seekers and treasure givers, irrespective of their other aspects and attributes. The asset based approach is about seeing older (indeed, all) people, not as a one dimensional cardboard cut out, but as multi dimensional, multi layered individuals, who, when animated and entrusted with the task of acting collectively and collaboratively, hold the key to the resolution of so many of the “problems” we are all struggling to solve.

What is so heartening about being involved in this work is that there appears to be a genuine appetite for rekindling the sense of community that people refer to – often rather wistfully – as something of a “bygone age”.

Far from having disappeared completely our experience is that there are people waiting to be contacted, people with all sorts of gifts to share with one another and that the “currency of caring for one another” is in far less a parlous state than the media and indeed, ourselves, might like to
think. ABCD is one way of opening doors – literally as well as metaphorically – into a community that can really begin to help itself.

**Implications for practice**

- Start with assets not deficits – what can the person do? What has the neighbourhood got to offer?
- Citizen led initiatives are more sustainable in the long term – work alongside citizens and support them to lead change.
- Make connections between people, clubs/associations, businesses and services so that they can work together and pool resources for a common goal.
- Find out what excites and motivates people, this is the energy of the neighbourhood and will drive change and improvement.
- Work towards sustainability from the outset.

**References**


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