Nurture Development
Development - Redefined

Community Centred Social Work:
Back To the Future

A Summary Report of Conversations between Social Work Leaders in NHS Trusts and Nurture Development

June 2024

Contents

"In social work, you can't avoid justice, it's where we're at and we need to start talking to that in the organisation but we're struggling to do that. This is a way to do that and it's not top down. We have place…what do we mean by this?"

All direct quotes in this report are from Masterclass participants from across the UK

This report summarises the dialogue held between social work practitioners and leaders of Nurture Development during 2023 and 2024. During sessions facilitated by Cormac Russell and Mick Ward, colleagues expressed dilemmas and questions about how asset-based community development (ABCD) could be applied in social work practice. Divided into two sections on dilemmas and implementation, this report provides a summary of these sessions, including practical insights for both individual practitioners and leaders in the NHS and Social Care.

Social work has increased as a directly employed workforce in the NHS, working in partnership with Council colleagues. Sustaining a social approach in multi-professional teams has posed challenges for how the role is defined and supported to avoid drifting from the community literacy that the profession is associated with. These sessions form part of a wider strategic programme for improvement in the support for social work, which sits with Social Workers | NHS England | Workforce, training and Education (www.hee.nhs.uk), contributing to a clearer vision for how the role should be developed (Linde et al., 2024).

In addressing key dilemmas, such as ABCD's cost-saving benefits versus managing time constraints, practitioners are encouraged to prioritise reflection, learning, and risk-taking. By creating evaluation layers and identifying key impact areas, the value of ABCD efforts can be demonstrated incrementally on a long-term journey back to the future of community-centred social work.

Questions:

1. How do we prove that the ABCD approach is less costly than current approaches?
2. How can we be certain not to retreat from responsibility to help people when moving more towards an enablement approach?
3. Is there sufficient time for learning and reflecting while on the frontline (day-to-day practice)? If not, how do we propose to address the paucity of reflective practice?
4. Are our expectations of the community too high, considering that times are hard, e.g. cost of living crisis?
5. Can community meet everyone's needs?

Critics of ABCD often misinterpret its intentions, fearing the decline of communities and the state's withdrawal from hard-won statutory social justice roles. However, ABCD is actually striving for a radical transformation of the relationship between institutions and communities and envisions communities generating their own wellbeing while still drawing on institutional expertise in a balanced manner that builds upon existing community and individual assets.

This report emphasises the importance of communities in addressing safeguarding concerns, particularly in light of the current cost-of-living crisis. Despite facing systemic challenges, ABCD remains crucial for strengthening social justice efforts and driving meaningful change in communities.

With regard to implementation, social work practitioners and leaders are urged to strike a harmonious balance between collaborating "with" communities and working alongside them in a manner that allows communities to lead change "by" themselves. By fostering a culture of permission, acknowledging and celebrating community efforts, and embracing calculated risks,

social workers can contribute to the strengthening of inclusive communities. Navigating the following balancing acts can help transition social work practice into a higher gear.

Implementation:

1. With/By
2. Local/Hyperlocal
3. Permission/Risk
4. Promotion/Celebration

Ultimately, by prioritising collaboration, innovation, and community-driven solutions, social workers can harness the full potential of ABCD and assume a suitable role in facilitating positive and lasting change within communities. This report is intended to serve as a launch pad that allows social workers to embark on this journey towards becoming a valuable resource for communities.

Introduction

Social workers in the NHS have the ability to explore the community's role within their daily practice and explore opportunities to tap into the strengths and gifts of the people and places they serve. ABCD serves as a valuable tool in this process. This summary report, meant for quick reading sessions during breaks or commutes, summarises conversations between social workers and professionals in allied roles across various sectors. Divided into sections on common questions, the implementation of solutions, and theoretical insights, it is meant to offer practical suggestions for integrating social work into community life for individual practitioners and leadership. This report can serve as a launch pad for embarking on a journey to transform social work into a valuable resource for communities.

Part 1: Questions

During Nurture Development's online training, practitioners engaged in discussions regarding the integration of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) into social work practice in the UK. These discussions, several key questions repeatedly surfaced:

1.1 How do we prove that the ABCD approach is less costly than current approaches?

The cost savings associated with older adults living at home rather than in residential or nursing homes are significant. ABCD initiatives, supported through 'small sparks' funds, aim to foster connected communities where older adults feel safe and engaged. While the impact of ABCD has been assessed using cost benefit analyses and social return on investment methodologies, these approaches are challenging due to ABCD being a community development approach where immediate cost benefits are inherently difficult to measure. A study that evaluated the ABCD program implemented by Leeds City Council revealed a social return ranging from £5.27 to £14.02 for every £1 invested (Rippon & South, 2017). This rather large range in the social return on investment reflects the diversity of individual life situations.

The rising costs of social care make ABCD initiatives crucial for addressing community needs in ethical yet cost-effective ways. Moving forward, the creation of evaluation layers and identification of 'key practice impacts' rather than 'key performance indicators' can help demonstrate the true value of ABCD practice and highlight the importance of exploring individual desires and

capabilities, both in their own lives and also in their participation in community-led activities and contribution to local associational life. A concrete example of promoting a 'key practice impact' could be encouraging supervisors to ask those they supervise the question: 'What haven't you done to enable more community impact?'.

1.2 In enabling a community-first approach, how can we be certain not simply to retreat from responsibility to help people?

Critics of ABCD typically argue that it leads to community decline and the state's withdrawal from its post-World War II role in promoting social justice. They express concern that strengths-based approaches place undue burdens on citizens who lack professional expertise to perform tasks that were previously carried out by paid professionals. However, this critique often fails to grasp the true intentions of ABCD. It creates a false dichotomy between community associations and institutions, mistakenly assuming that professional training is the sole means for developing the ability to provide appropriate assistance.

ABCD does not advocate a diminished role of the state but rather seeks a radical transformation of its relationship with communities. It aims to shift the dynamic between individual practitioners, like social workers, and the individuals they serve. By fostering strong connections within communities and an awareness of each other's strengths, ABCD envisions communities capable of generating their own wellbeing and safety, while still engaging with institutional expertise when needed.

For instance, in cases of domestic abuse, many victims initially turn to family and friends for support before seeking institutional assistance (Gregory, 2017). Initiatives like 'Ask Me' by Women's Aid (Stanley, et al., 2021) aim to strengthen informal support networks through the provision of helpful responses and the promotion of understanding. Institutions play a crucial role by providing refuge, enforcing injunctions, and offering resources to communities to enhance an existing strength – knowledge of a crime that may be hidden from the police but not necessarily from friends and family.

It is essential to collect narratives of successful alignments between institutions and communities, where institutions supplement, not supplant, community capabilities. By highlighting instances where practitioners work alongside informal associations, cultural transformation and trust-building within communities can be promoted.

1.3 Is there time for learning and reflecting while on the frontline (day-to-day practice)?

Participants in discussions have highlighted the taxing nature of their daily social work, leaving little time for pause or reflection on strategic overhauls. While the implementation of ABCD can be time-consuming initially, it will lead to time savings in the long run. Seasoned professionals often feel fatigued by frequent organisational restructures and policy changes and may view ABCD as just another demanding strategy. However, ABCD calls for a gradual process of realignment between institutions, communities, and individual practitioners, facilitated through ongoing conversations among leadership, frontline workers, citizens, and carers.

An example from Leeds illustrates how ABCD can lead to more efficient outcomes. By transforming assessment processes, social workers were able to reduce lengthy forms (16 pages) to concise documents (3 pages) that facilitated more meaningful conversations encompassing the individual's entire life context (their family, kinship, friendship and community connections) and

support needs. This shift required practitioners and leaders to engage in positive risk-taking, fostering a culture of permission that allowed all involved parties to thrive and work to their respective strengths. The approach taken by Leeds City Council emphasises the importance of aligning social care with neighbourhoods where residents shape the future of social care and articulate their aspirations as citizens.

Conversations in Leeds based on this new approach were based on three main lines of inquiry:

a. What does the citizen expect from life?

b. What gifts and strengths do the citizens, both as individuals and in their community, have available to meet these expectations?

c. What type of support does the citizen expect from social care and other professionals?

ABCD stimulates practitioners to contemplate on their potential contributions to the lives of citizens that go beyond conventional service provisions. It encourages questions such as 'How are citizens generating recovery and wellbeing?', 'How can a practitioner contribute to fostering a sense of community belonging?' and 'How can practitioners and citizens both make contributions to community-based associations?'. Community builders encourage mutual support; for example, older individuals receive postal deliveries for their absent neighbours during working hours, creating conversations and gratitude when neighbours later drop by to collect their deliveries. This initiative exemplifies the positive impact small connections can have on the community.

1.4 Can ABCD Meet Everyone's Needs?

Clearly, ABCD alone cannot address all needs. However, ABCD approaches, if employed alongside other strengths-based practices, can make a valuable contribution when addressing the priorities of individuals, families, and communities.

ABCD prioritises identifying an individual's assets, gifts, and strengths. The goal is to ensure that individuals do not simply receive formal services, but that they engage in reciprocal relationships within their community to both offer and receive support. In terms of activities and the participation in associations, ABCD aims to promote a wide range of different activities and advocates for a paradigm shift, where success is no longer measured by how many people attend one particular walking group, for instance, but by the amount of diversity. For example, there could be ten different walking groups that are interconnected, thus creating a network of relationships that result in a culture of care and community.

Due to the way institutional support is organised, marginalised individuals are often only able to associate with individuals who share the same diagnostic label and interact with paid staff. While some may lead fulfilling lives with a wide variety of activities that include arts and sports, they may not have the same diversity in their social connections. Recognizing the power of being introduced as a friend rather than a service user is important. Another example is that instead of organizing a quiz night at an institution specifically tailored and exclusive to individuals with autism, it may be beneficial to reach out to a local pub and have them organize a quiz night that individuals with autism can attend along with other neighbours. This serves as an important reminder that social work involves more than just providing relief to clients; it is about precipitating community-owned and driven change. At the Philadelphia Project in the Netherlands, practitioners aim to integrate individuals with learning disabilities and mental health challenges into the wider community and promote cohesion among local residents. Their role extends beyond therapy interventions and

case management and aims to challenge and positively disrupt anxieties and assumptions on both sides.

A critical aspect of effective ABCD within communities is that it ensures that those in need of care and support can access more community activity, i.e., not just 'services' but they themselves contribute to community activity. This approach acknowledges that everyone can make a valuable contribution and places a particular emphasis on reciprocity, thus transforming individuals from passive recipients of services into active contributors.

1.5 How can we expect so much of community when times are so hard?

Practitioners have expressed concerns regarding the ability of communities to come together amidst growing financial pressures. The response emphasizes two main points. While communities have been affected by austerity measures for over 14 years, there are still global instances where communities manage to connect and build solidarity to challenge injustice and create things together. However, the current cost-of-living crisis presents significant challenges as poverty levels again reach levels not seen since the 2008 global financial crisis.

The ongoing cost-of-living crisis will likely diminish hope and interest in community organising and solidarity movements. However, from an ABCD perspective, the solution still lies within the community, regardless of how much associational life may decline. Ultimately, as demonstrated by initiatives like the Family Independence Initiative in the US, the most effective responses to poverty are rooted in ensuring that individuals living in poverty have the means to secure equitable solutions that cater to their needs and the needs of their families. Equity-deserving groups must obtain the power to redefine the issues and shift authority so that they can play a central role in bringing about meaningful change in their lives. As social work returns to its radical roots, it must find new ways of facilitating this shift in authority and equity to create more community-based alternatives to current top-down solutions that are failing those living in poverty.

Part 2: Implementation

"How do we take the energy of this conversation into what we do next?"

This report highlights the convergence of asset-based community development (ABCD) and social work, addressing concerns and questions that arose during discussions with Nurture Development. Moving forward, social work must consider community-based support alternatives such as those proposed by the ABCD approach. ABCD and community-centred social work share similar goals but operate in different lanes. Social work must find a middle ground that balances community connections, statutory responsibilities, and individual focus. Four balancing acts are key to re-interpret social work in a community-centred context.

2.1 With/By

Co-production, as a policy trend, has significantly impacted our understanding of power relations. ABCD urges us to go beyond co-production towards solidarity building at grass-roots levels. However, before doing so, we must ask ourselves which approach is most suitable for a given

*"Whether it's health of social work or whatever, we need to
adjust the balance, start unlocking the social determinants,
having the right conversations with the right people, over and
over again."*

context. The ABCD approach to community work requires a delicate balance between collaborating "with" communities and empowering them to lead change "by" themselves. Motivational interviewing, a technique commonly used in social work (Hohman, Pierce, & Barnett, 2015), exemplifies this balance. It enables individuals to reflect on behaviours linked to better health habits. For instance, when a social worker employs this technique with someone who is ambivalent about seeking substance misuse support, they acknowledge the existing power dynamics and offer their expertise. As the individual being supported progresses, they may contribute their own strengths to community activities such as leading a walking or recovery group. Thus, while earlier stages of the relationship between a social worker and an individual may best be described as a 'co-production' and working 'with' citizens, this can transition to autonomous community-centred action, reducing reliance on institutions and fostering interdependence.

2.2 Local/Hyperlocal

"How do we get to the granularity of community?"

In training sessions with Nurture Development, participants have raised questions regarding the scale at which ABCD operates. While many participants seemed accustomed to centralisation as a measure of systemic effectiveness, ABCD approaches advocate for a paradigm shift towards placing more value on the intricacies of community life, in other words, decentralising and relocating authority locally. ABCD emphasises hyperlocal development. It aims to operate on a street level, fostering associations of associations and gradually bridging gaps within the estate.

In Firs & Bromford in Birmingham, the implementation of ABCD has been facilitated by 'Street Connectors' who actively formed connections within the community, applying ABCD principles. They have documented their experiences and insights in a blog, highlighting how they focused on groups of 100-200 households. This blog serves as a valuable resource, demonstrating how ABCD has taken root in an area often perceived as disadvantaged. Through the diligent efforts of local neighbours, it is becoming evident that this community has not only failed because of systemic shortcomings but that it overcame these failures by generating its own wellbeing, safety, and prosperity. Their blog makes for insightful reading and contains an interesting eight-step breakdown of their street-connecting journey.

2.3 Promotion/Celebration

*"We've got really good examples but how do we
make it everyone's business?"*

A key aspect that has been highlighted in meetings with the public and third sectors and Nurture Development is the need to raise awareness of community efforts, as participants often received feedback such as "We didn't know it was going on" and "How can we make sure more people know about this?". Celebrating community-led efforts is a fundamental principle of ABCD, which places an emphasis on recognising gifts, community connections, and innovations that arise organically. Unlike conventional community marketing approaches, which rely on institutional branding and top-down language, celebrations and community stories possess a more human appeal, making them fun and relevant, especially when led by the communities themselves.

A noteworthy example illustrating this point is the recognition of the 'unsung heroes' during the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with unprecedented challenges, communities demonstrated remarkable resilience and solidarity, with mutual aid networks and other grassroots initiatives emerging to support those in need. Research conducted by the Local Trust (The Local Trust, 2022) confirms that communities responded to the challenges of the pandemic in ways that larger institutions could not. Numerous instances of neighbours coming together to address the crisis were celebrated. In this context, the Street Connectors in Firs & Bromford are no exception.

2.4 Permission/Risk

*"You'll get pressure from elsewhere, but we'll help
you with that."*

The conversations within the Nurture Development masterclasses emphasised the importance of fostering a culture of permission and overcoming a prevalence of risk aversion in social work. While risk assessment is crucial for minimizing harm, excessive emphasis on maximum safety can impede community connections. Social workers are often reluctant to involve individuals in unregulated community activities due to safety, liability, and privacy concerns. For instance, suggesting that someone with learning disabilities join a local knitting group raises questions about the potential risks and benefits. Nevertheless, balancing these considerations for DBS checks and safeguarding processes is essential, especially given their potential for community development and to enhance wellbeing and solidarity.
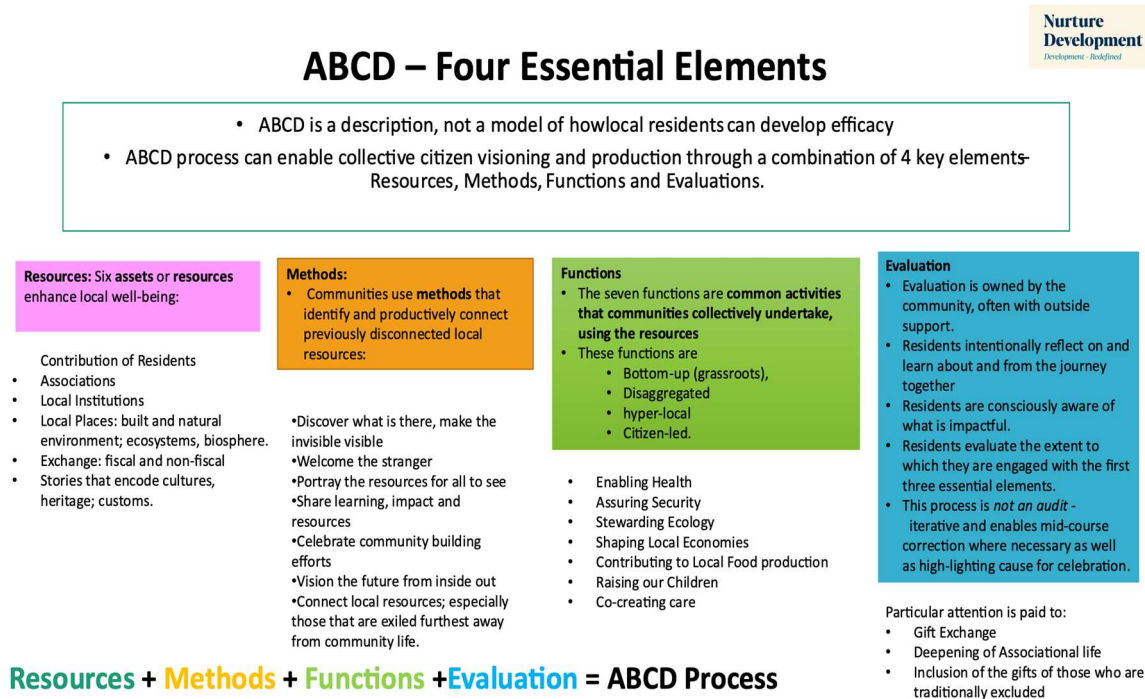
Conclusion: Embracing Asset-Based Community Development in Social Work

This summary report is intended as a starting point for system leaders seeking practical ways to build more community-centred services and adopt new ways of working that better harness the social work role as a catalyst for sustainable support. It also aims to be useful to social work practitioners wishing to integrate Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) into their practice, thus fostering stronger connections with communities and becoming a part of community-led change. By addressing challenges, such as demonstrating ABCD's cost-saving benefits and managing time constraints, practitioners can navigate the complexities of community life more effectively. Implementation strategies offer practical insights for bridging the gap between institutional practitioners fulfilling statutory responsibilities and communities that are self-sufficient in promoting wellbeing and have the potential to achieve even more with appropriately positioned practitioners. By promoting a culture of permission, celebrating community efforts, and embracing risk, social workers can contribute to building more generative and inclusive communities. Ultimately, by prioritising collaboration, innovation, and community-driven solutions, NHS leaders, in partnership with their social work practitioners and multi-professional teams, can harness the full potential of ABCD to create positive and lasting change within communities.

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Figure 1 illustrates the essential elements of ABCD, namely resources, methods, functions, and evaluations. This conceptualization views the community as a dynamic entity, encompassing both physical and relational dimensions, that serves specific functions. By adopting such a perspective, the field of social work can enhance its practice and strengthen its connection with the community.

Figure 1. ABCD – Four Essential Elements

The Helper's Crossroads (Figure 2) illustrates the additional ask of community development in relation to community engagement which requires the shift of power to communities in order to enable citizens to have parts of their lives in the 'byspace'. In the 'by space', rather than being wholly done to, for and even with, citizens' shared gifts alone generate solutions and innovations alongside the necessary contained and timely supports of institutions such as social care.
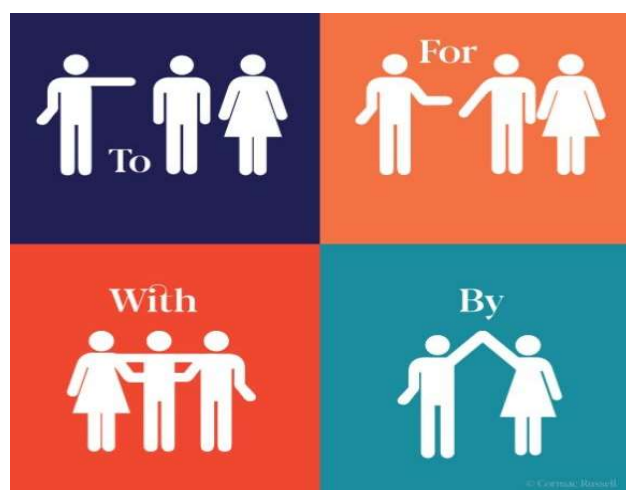

1) Although ABCD and community-centred social work operate on parallel tracks, there remains unused potential for even greater alignment.

2) This alignment can only be maximized if practitioners recognize the full potential of connected communities.

3) The full potential of communities is recognised when they are approached as complex, self-organising systems with their own ecosystem and problem-solving capabilities.

Figure 2. The Helper's Crossroads sourced from Nuture Development Website

Appendix B – Timetable of masterclass sessions held across the UK between 2023 and 2024

Organisation	Session Date
NHS Lancashire & South Cumbria Care Foundation Trust	12th June 2023
Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust Jointly with Kent and Medway	21st September 2023
NHS Manchester Integrated care	23rd Nov 9-11
South London and Maudsley NHS FT	TBC
NHS Midlands Partnership FT	19th December 2023
Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust	11th April 2024
Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership	24th September 2024
East London NHS Foundation Trust	31st January 2024