



# **An ABCD approach to setting up a community group in your local area**

**A Time to Shine toolkit written in partnership with Leeds Community Connect**

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Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is an approach that generates and sustains community activities. This approach always puts community members at the forefront of any work undertaken, building from a foundation of what individuals and communities want in terms of activities and services.

The idea for Leeds Community Connect was devised and delivered by Community First Yorkshire in response to the rurality of some outlying districts of Leeds. The project was funded for four years by the Time to Shine programme.

This toolkit was written by Sharon Middling, the project coordinator with extensive experience of ABCD, in partnership with Time to Shine. It explains, step-by-step, how to go about creating your own community activities, wherever you may live.

Time to Shine is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and takes a 'test and learn' approach to improve the lives of people aged 50 and over.



**Community First**  
**Yorkshire**



## Background

Leeds Community Connect was designed to enable and empower communities to better serve their ageing population. It aimed to reduce social isolation and loneliness through working in a volunteer-led, co-productive way. The project initially focused on affluent rural areas in north Leeds which had under-used community resources. After two years the model was replicated in rural areas in south Leeds. One project coordinator was employed on the project for 17.5 hours per week and in total eight new community groups were set up. Seven groups continued after Time to Shine funding ended.

**“Volunteering for Elderberries has changed my life completely. The formation of Elderberries has had a knock-on effect in the village. Five months down the line it’s opened up a whole new village life and a whole new group of friends and I hope to expand on that as time goes on. I’ve only positive things to say about it. I wasn’t part of the village before; I’ve lived here for 40 years and never knew anybody except my immediate neighbours.”**

*(Volunteer, Leeds Community Connect)*

## The basics

Co-production involves a two-way process between a paid project coordinator and volunteer project leads, whereby skills and knowledge are transferred and strengths are built upon to establish, maintain and sustain a community group. Project leads integrate members throughout when making decisions relating to the group - the where, when and what of running activities. The project coordinator gradually withdraws support when volunteers feel confident and capable as the group becomes established. People make ABCD work happen because the model is built on trust and good relationships.



# An ABCD community group toolkit

Leeds Community Connect was funded to work with people aged 50+ but the model could be adapted for use with people of all ages. All community groups must be inclusive, friendly and welcoming.

## One member's story

“I go out to other groups in Kippax. Apart from that I spend a lot of time in my flat. Sometimes I visit my family but I don't have the best of relationships with them. I'm always looking for new things to do and saw the flyer in the post office. Kippax Community Group is close to where I live so I don't have to travel. I also knew Jenny from other groups.

Now I have somewhere else to go in the village. I have made new friends who I see in the village when I'm out shopping. I also sit with people from the group if we meet in the café, meaning I'm not sitting alone.

I feel more valued since coming to the group as I set up the tables and chairs and drinks prior to the others coming. I also ask people to complete the signing-in sheet. Helping the volunteers makes me feel good and useful.

Now I'm doing new activities and learning new things. I'm proud that I'm helping the group. Everyone is friendly and welcoming and we have a laugh. I'm going to keep coming to the group, look for other groups I might like and also think about new things I would like to do.”





# A step-by-step ABCD guide to setting up your own community project

## 1. Finding people who care

Loose project parameters enable you to identify stakeholders who may have a shared vision. It's important at this stage not to impose a project on communities.

Every community has a key set of individuals and organisations who you can ask for help to get ideas off the ground. An internet search is a good starting point. Talk to as many people as possible during this phase and introduce the project to see if there's interest in the idea. It's important to sell the idea and find a concise, catchy way to spark interest and get your message across.

Head off any potential negative feelings with reassurances that the project won't duplicate existing activities and you'll refer people to existing groups where appropriate. You can start making progress on the project with one person but the aim is to start building a small group of people to work together with the goal of setting up a community group.

Gather all options for potential groups and narrow them down over time. Revisiting areas or organisations may be necessary because timing is a key aspect to this phase. Individuals might not currently have the capacity or ability to drive a project forward (health or family commitments for example) but this could change in time.

## 2. Identifying and mobilising assets

Asset mapping runs in tandem with the previous phase. Think of an asset map as a community directory, a document that identifies the strengths and resources of individual communities. You can create an asset map as a:

- Comprehensive list of powerful individuals, associations, resources, contacts, services and institutions within a community
- Physical map with annotations
- Picture or diagram
- Database or spreadsheet

The key is to find a method that works for you. You need to think about physical assets as well as individuals and existing groups. Here are some examples of what to consider when asset mapping:

- **Places** – buildings such as village halls, church halls, housing association rooms, cafes, pubs, leisure centres, supermarkets, schools, police stations, fire stations, medical services, local businesses, libraries. What are the facilities like? Hire costs? Accessibility? When are they available?
- **Spaces** – parks, seating areas
- **People** – councillors, faith leaders, GPs, community workers, active volunteers,
- **Transport** – bus stops, walking routes, car parking
- **Sources for support** – supermarkets, councils, housing associations
- **Existing community activity** - what's already going on locally?

At Leeds Community Connect the asset map was initially started by the project coordinator via internet searching and physically exploring the area. It was enhanced by the steering group as they knew exactly what assets existed within their community, when activities took place and how to avoid duplication. It's important to add to this map as the project develops and you become aware of more assets.

### 3. Citizens shaping services

There are many ways of enabling community members to make decisions about what activities they want to take part in. A few ideas include:

- Generating an ideas sheet for members to nominate activities and tick all that they'd like to do. The ones with the most ticks are the activities you set up first.
- Host a market place/taster day. Here volunteers show off what they can offer and members vote on which activities they want to continue.
- Have an open day at a local community centre or cafe and ask attendees to complete a short survey about what activities they would like and when.
- Start off with a core activity which is currently unavailable in the local community and from the outset spend time with members, building rapport and finding out what activities people enjoy or would like to see next.

What you are trying to achieve is an atmosphere where every idea is a good idea and all ideas are acted upon. To embed the philosophy of giving members a voice from the outset and ensuring this forms the basis of the activity calendar for the coming months.



#### 4. Recognising that 'everyone has gifts'

When recruiting volunteers it's important to explore all options. Many volunteers join after being asked by existing members, others join after seeing opportunities advertised through local adverts and social media. Often members are encouraged to step up and become formal or informal volunteers to support the project. Every member or volunteer has a set of skills that can be used to aid and develop the group. Note that sometimes the line between volunteer and member is blurred and volunteers may face personal challenges and members may jump at the chance to help out if asked.

There are a few points worth considering when working with volunteers:

- Enabling people to naturally take on responsibility in their own time means that they are invested in the group and take on tasks they are happy with.
- The project coordinator needs to consider when a volunteer may be ready to take more responsibility or own a task, then have an open and honest conversation with them, boosting confidence and diffusing any worries which arise.
- Volunteers sometimes need to be supported in a role before they take on the title. Buddying can help, where volunteers observe your task then start to do it themselves under supervision. Your input reduces until you're not needed anymore.
- Volunteers don't always want formal recognition for their contribution as they benefit from the social reward and status within the group.

#### 5. Groups focused on sustainability

A good place to start is helping a few volunteers and members to organise themselves as a steering group from the outset, meeting regularly to discuss such items as how budget is spent, how best to promote the group and planning future activities. In this way decisions about sustainability are embedded and can adapt as the group develops.

Money is always a key element when working towards being sustainable. A self-funding group is the number one option, as it means the group is sustainable without external help. To do this donations or payments need to be made by members at every session and be enough to cover costs. Even if your group has money it's still best to charge members a small amount from the outset. It can be difficult to introduce new charges once a project has been running for a while.

If a self-funding model isn't possible then look at fundraising options or local grants. For example, parish or ward councils may have small amounts of funding to spend locally and they are a good first port of call. Alternatives include the National Lottery Community Fund or local supermarket charity schemes. Your group may need to be constituted, have a management committee and a bank account before a grant can be given.



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## Challenges to consider

- Establishing a group can take a while so don't get disheartened!
- ABCD doesn't always fit with funding programmes – form filling, risk assessments, training, monitoring, evaluation – that's where a paid coordinator can help
- ABCD work is time consuming, takes longer than you think and this can be challenging when you're working in a limited time frame
- A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to work
- Not many groups start off as a multi-activity hub and this is ok
- Transport is often a barrier to participation so consider providing transport in-house, perhaps using volunteers, and advertising this from the outset

## Top tips

- Ask the following questions - Are we reaching the right people? What else can we try? Is the group accessible to people with additional needs? Is it inclusive and welcoming?
- Don't impose a pre-planned project on communities
- No idea is a bad idea; you never know what activity will take off until you try
- Ask members to spread the word and run 'bring a friend for free' sessions
- Use the best forms of media for your community to promote the group
- If a group needs money it's important to be honest about the reasons and let members decide whether or not to introduce or increase charges

## When it works!

When an ABCD project is a success the group thrives, with members and volunteers making new friends, learning new skills, feeling valued and most importantly, being proud to be actively involved. There's a real community spirit that exists and members naturally pull together for each other and for the greater good of the group.

True ABCD enables a snowball effect as members and volunteers introduce new members, activities, contacts or skills. A quality, responsive group develops which strengthens the local community, benefits all the people involved and is attractive to potential funders.