

# A Practitioner's Guide to Asset Based Community Development:

Sharing Learning from Resilient Together





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We would like to thank all of the residents, partners and stakeholders that took time to support and engage with our work.



## Acknowledgements



It has been a privilege for us at CPSL Mind to develop this project and to witness first-hand the power of asset-based approaches as catalysts for change, both in terms of individual empowerment and of building connected, resilient communities.

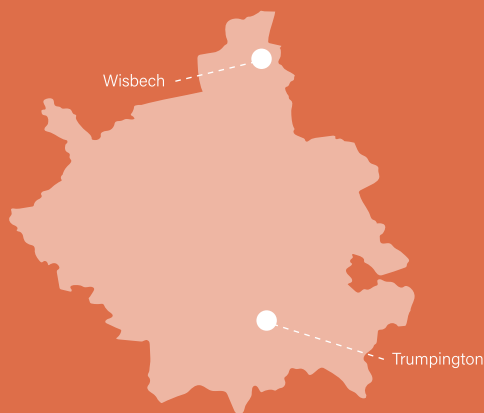
Our Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) project has influenced the way we think as a whole organisation and continues to change the way we do things. The concept that everyone has strengths and talents, whatever their situation, underpins our approach to recovery, co-production and wellbeing.

Aly Anderson  
CPSL Mind CEO

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Aly Anderson".

# Introduction

Resilient Together is a three-year community building project which has been developed and delivered by Cambridgeshire, Peterborough and South Lincolnshire (CPSL) Mind since October 2015. Our focus has been on the residents living in the communities of Wisbech and the Southern Fringe of Cambridge.



Cambridgeshire County Council funded this project with a view to increasing community resilience in these areas and piloting new approaches that can be shared elsewhere across the county.

Throughout this project, the Resilient Together team has tested and refined its Asset Based Community Development approach to empowering residents and building social connection. This has resulted in many examples of community-led activities, enabling residents to use existing knowledge, skills and lived experience to achieve positive, citizen-led change around the things they care most about in their lives.



"The relationships we have with our friends, family, neighbours and colleagues are, for many of us, the most important things in our lives. Increasingly, we understand the link between having strong and meaningful social connections and living a healthy and successful life. And we see that having more connected communities means a more thriving, productive society, in which we can all contribute and live fulfilling lives"

A Connected Society: A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change  
(HM Government 2018)

Whilst reflecting on the journey of Resilient Together, it has become clear that our understanding of Asset Based Community Development has broadened and deepened during the course of this project. At the same time, we have also recognised that putting ABCD theory into practice is full of challenges. Our experience of working using an asset-based approach has led to significant learning for the Resilient Together team.

This learning is so important to us and our funders, that we have developed this guide: to share our key learnings and provide a point of reference and support to anyone who is interested in working in an Asset Based Community Development way. This is our interpretation of ABCD theory and our experience of applying it in practice, with a particular focus on mental health and wellbeing.

Since the start of Resilient Together, the ideas that originally shaped this project - that recognising individual strengths is key to individual wellbeing and that a connected community has a key part to play in improving resilience - have gained significant momentum nationwide. The issues of tackling loneliness and increasing community connectivity have been highlighted as a national priority. In October 2018 the Government Loneliness Strategy highlighted the link between social connection and wellbeing.

Since then, Resilient Together has been highlighted by the Department of Health and Social Care as an example of how existing strengths and skills can be connected in ways that strengthen community and improve wellbeing (<https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/using-existing-skills-to-strengthen-communities-and-improve-wellbeing>).



Our team has been fortunate enough to be trained and mentored by Cormac Russell and Chris Chinnock, from Nurture Development, who are one of eleven strategic partners of the ABCD Institute, and the lead partner in Europe. The Asset Based Community Development Institute is central to a large and growing movement that considers local assets as the primary building blocks of sustainable community development.

Nurture Development supports the proliferation of inclusive, bottom up, community driven change. During the lifetime of the project both Chris and Cormac have provided the Resilient Together Team with valuable insights as well as supportive challenge.





"I had the pleasure of facilitating ABCD training with the Resilient Together team at CPSL Mind and was immediately struck by their energy and enthusiasm for doing things differently, being open to new ideas and sharing learning - this guide represents their collected stories, knowledge and wisdom from practicing what they preach.

For those of us fortunate enough to be paid to be helpful in community life it is vital that we recognise that our involvement can sometimes come with strings attached and that in our efforts to be helpful we don't unwittingly cause harm to the very people we are seeking to serve.

The truth is that sometimes the most helpful thing a practitioner can do is to get out of the way and let people get on with things! In this changing relationship it is important that professionals are able to understand how they can best come alongside communities in a way which is truly collaborative and mutually beneficial, this guide is a great resource for sharing that ongoing learning."

Chris Chinnock, Nurture Development

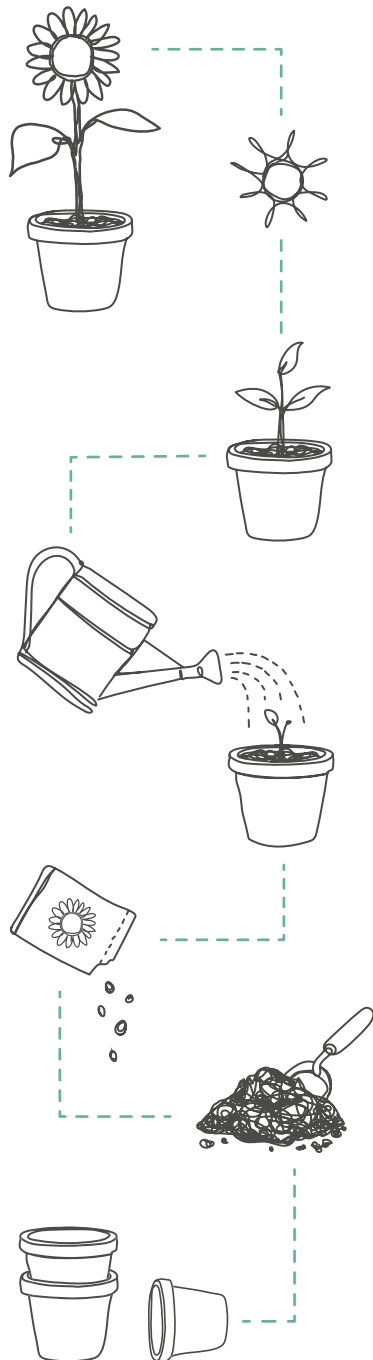




"ABCD is based on the belief that people primarily want a life, not a service and that the best way to get a 'good life' is by increasing interdependency in communities."

Professors Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight





## What is ABCD?

Asset Based Community Development aims to encourage a sustainable, interconnected network of local relationships within communities which connects with and builds upon existing resources.

These resources (or assets) take the form of people, their gifts, skills and passions, local social networks, non-profit businesses and institutions, physical spaces, and stories of community success, all of which can be found in any community. Once realised, there are endless opportunities for residents to achieve whatever vision they may have and use their own means to do so.

ABCD seeks to create a positive lens through which residents and practitioners can all see one another as having something of value that they can contribute to their community. More specifically, ABCD starts with the question of: 'What is strong here and how can the local community make it stronger?'; as opposed to the deficit-based question of: 'What is wrong here, and how can we fix it?'







## Discovery

The basis for working in an asset-based way is the realisation that every community, no matter what reputation it has for being deprived, apathetic or 'troubled', has an abundance of local resources. If connected appropriately, these resources can pave the way for self-sustaining, inclusive communities that stand strong despite social or economic adversity.

A primary role of the Asset Based Community Development community builder is to discover what sources of care, energy and motivation already exist within any community. This is known as the 'Discovery Phase' of a community building project and involves spending time in the flow of life within that community, curiously enquiring into whatever activity you may come across; trying to identify the people that often underpin the hustle and bustle of community life. Discovering people who naturally connect others is key to this phase - but is not as straightforward as it sounds.



Our team experienced various challenges around what 'discovery' (or 'discovery mode' as we called it) looked like in action. Common dilemmas we experienced included: 'How do we have authentic conversations with people about their community and possibilities for the future, without creating the perception that we want something?' and 'What do informal assets actually look like?'

Through reflecting on our own practice we have found some key ways of working that have helped make the most of our time in discovery mode.



## Drop the agenda

It's fundamental that the conversations we have with residents are about truly listening to them and building a relationship, with no preconceived agenda.

At the beginning we found a strong temptation to be thinking about a potential outcome every time we had a conversation. This meant sometimes we would inadvertently steer the conversation away from a resident's own vision, passion or concern.

Our Community Builder Ben found that *"listening without an end goal in mind"* really helped him to develop more genuine relationships, which later led to more meaningful activities.

## De-professionalise

Another factor that influenced the depth of our interactions within the community was how we presented ourselves. We noticed that by using certain words or phrases, we could trigger certain stereotypes in people's understanding of our actual roles. For example, the title 'Community Development Worker' was commonly interpreted as someone who was there to build the community for residents rather than someone whose job it was to encourage more residents to do for themselves.

*"Community doesn't do formality, clipboards, and direct questioning. Residents do humour, tea and chatting. I found the less we talked about community building, the more community building happened."*

Lexi, Resilient Together Community Builder

### Top Tip:

Just do what residents do and you'll start to see all the great things that go on under the radar.



## Go where the energy is

At the beginning of our journey we had a primary focus on building any new relationships that might lead to new activities or groups. However, as our work progressed, we learnt to be more focused in our approaches, to become more attuned to existing energy within the community and following that. This idea of 'going where the energy is' has proved fundamental to successful ABCD practice. This involved becoming sensitive to existing energy in the community and introducing ourselves to residents whose passions were already ignited.

*"I went along to a local archaeological dig, not knowing anybody, and just got stuck in. After a while, I ended up having lots of meaningful conversations about residents' interests and their wider lives because the people there were clearly motivated and passionate."*

Lexi, Resilient Together Community Builder

## Just Be

By spending time observing existing community activity, and being present without holding any preconceptions of historic local problems in your thoughts, you start to become more aware of examples of neighbourly exchange, creative expression, and lots of small acts of kindness.

We found that by tuning into the subtle interactions of community life and just being in active community spaces with a smile on your face, opportunities to engage in rich, non-intrusive conversations presented themselves.

*"Knocking on doors and introducing myself as the local community builder really didn't mean much to residents. I had way more meaningful conversations when I was taking my dog for a walk, or talking about the weather!"*

Adam, Resilient Together Community Builder

## Project Manager viewpoint:

"The Discovery Phase of the project raised a number of challenges for the team. When on the ground, the community builders realised that having high targets, around number of contacts they were making or conversations they were having with residents, sometimes came into direct conflict with working in an asset based way. As a team, we learnt that having such structured outcomes was counter-productive as the community builders felt pressured to come away with something specific which could pigeonhole the content of the conversation. We noticed that people responded less openly when the community builder had an agenda at the forefront of their minds.

I took a risk and lowered the expectation in terms of achieving a quantitative result allowing space and time for the community builders to 'just be' in their community spaces. The community builders were then able to spend more time nurturing genuine relationships which led to more sustainable community development in the long term."

Jo, Resilient Together Project Manager

**Top Tip:**

There is no short cut to building trust.

## Building Relationships

As we continued to discover how the assets within our communities presented themselves, we realised that in order to create interactions and encourage more resident-led community development, building trusting relationships was essential.

Asset Based Community Development is not a quick-fix approach. It takes time to build genuine relationships.

We learnt that if you try to lend a different perspective or invite people to come together before they trust

your intentions, you can be seen as an outsider and barriers can go up. However, if you go at the pace of trust, and prove your reliability and compassion, you can start to fall behind the scenes and get to know the people who are running the show.

*"It is a big investment in time, but was so important to weave the relationships in the community."*

Adam, Resilient Together Community Builder

### Invited

*"A retired gentleman who knows everyone and everything that's going on in the community, invited me to serve tea and coffee with him at an event the local church was organising.*

*When I sat there with him, he'd introduce me as 'the young man who wants to help you build the community'. When I wasn't with him I'd mention that he brought me along to meet people. In both instances, people responded with a big smile and a welcoming conversation about their community."*

Ben, Resilient Together Community Builder

### Uninvited

*"A colleague and I decided to go to a community photography group with the aim of getting to know some residents.*

*We turned up and started trying to interact with people, but I was quickly approached by the resident who was running it. She asked me who I was and why I was there. It was clear that I was seen as an outsider and had no credibility with the group."*

Adam, Resilient Together Community Builder





## Managing expectations

We found citizens and other professionals sometimes held beliefs about our role which conflicted with our resident-led values. The expectation was that it was our responsibility to do the community building either with them or on their behalf.

We also reflected on our own inclination to help someone by 'doing for' them. We realised that this 'doing for' style of helping is quite an ingrained habit in human nature - and a real temptation, especially in situations where barriers emerged or things weren't moving as quickly as we'd hoped they would.

For successful outcomes, it was crucial that residents had a clear understanding of their part in the process. When this message was confused, there was a risk of damaging our relationships as residents could be left disappointed.

We needed to constantly ensure that there was a clear understanding of our role.

## Emotional intelligence

We found having an awareness of the emotions and wellbeing of ourselves and others was important when approaching people and encouraging more social engagement.

Sometimes having community conversations with people around their lives and potential was not welcomed. It was important that our community builders were able to read these signals so that we didn't make anyone feel pressured or uncomfortable. We also needed to ensure that our desire to achieve citizen-led community development didn't compromise anyone's wellbeing.

### We found we were able to manage expectations better when we:

- 1** were open and honest about the boundaries of our role right from the start - if we did more in the beginning to "get things off the ground" we had a harder time shifting the responsibility later on.
- 2** shared inspirational stories of citizen-led community change to show and bring to life what we were working towards.
- 3** emphasised the importance of community-driven effort in terms of sustainability. Reminding residents that our project had an end date and that we weren't going to be here forever.

Additionally, how we were feeling could impact the interactions we were having as well. If we were feeling low in energy or lacking motivation, we were often faced with mirrored responses.

To manage this, we regularly reflected on our practice and challenged one another as a team to keep perspective of how we were engaging in the community. You can read more about reflective practice on pages 28 and 29.



### Top Tip:

*Be the friend at the party who starts a conversation, and then steps away, leaving them to build their own relationship.*

## Connecting People

While learning about the community and building relationships has been essential for us, we also came to realise that what we then did with that knowledge and those relationships was vital. We realised that without bringing residents together, the sustainability of the work was questionable.

Resilient Together's success has come from creating space for residents who share a vision, passion or a common link to informally come together. We found a variety of methods helped achieve this, some of which are outlined below.

### Creating space

Creating space to allow conversations to spark and connections to form has been a key element of our work in Resilient Together.

When we met two or more people who had a similar motivation to act, we would encourage them to come together to meet and share ideas. This was often a very informal meeting, at a café or someone's house. Our role would then be to facilitate a discussion around what the next steps might be, and who those residents already knew that could help them.

We also found that establishing a regular 'pop up' space could be beneficial in sparking connections, particularly in communities where there weren't many community places to mingle, or 'bumping spaces' as we call them. Having a regular space also gave people who were passionate about community the opportunity to seek us out. For us, these pop ups were most successful when located at local community centres.

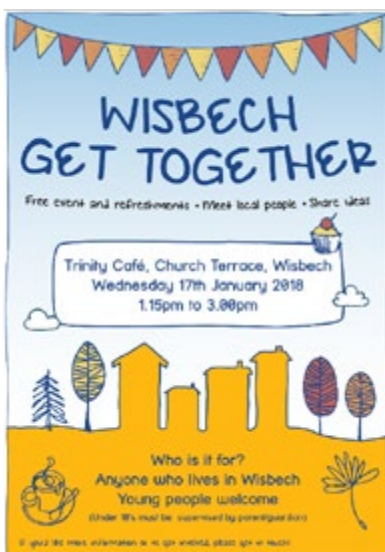




## Hosting a space

We also hosted a regular community event which we co-designed with residents. The format of these 'Get Togethers' was established via a resident-led service design approach. As part of this process we trained residents to carry out in-depth ethnographic interviews with other residents, which established common themes and motivations.

The result was an informal space in which people could connect with each other and share knowledge, interests and skills.



A special thanks to national Mind who funded the co-design of our Get Togethers!



A Get Together is an opportunity for local people to come together and make connections to increase a sense of belonging and safety.

## Get Together Tips



### Personally invite people:

Posters, leaflets and emails can be easily dismissed. Emailing attracts professionals but not residents. A personal invitation from someone who was familiar was the reason that most people came to a Get Together. If they weren't invited, then they were less likely to come.



### Only invite residents:

When professionals attend a Get Together then the dynamics of the group changes and agendas come into the room. These agendas change the topics of conversation. Whether intended or not, a client-professional relationship is created



### Informal activities:

Activities that are facilitated informally work best, giving residents space to chat and build relationships.



### Keep the venue the same:

Use community spaces that have good access and are familiar to residents. Use the same venue rather than changing locations for continuity.

## Story Sharing Events - Connecting Connectors

An effective method used to bring people together and build on what is strong in a community was by hosting small story sharing events.

The main aim of a story sharing event was to create a space where resident connectors were encouraged to share stories of people coming together demonstrating how much activity actually exists in the community. During the events residents would exchange genuine enthusiasm and appreciation for each other's contributions to the neighbourhood and people left inspired to do something themselves.

To generate these outcomes the events were structured as follows:

- a brief introduction
- an ice breaker
- a story sharing activity
- a discussion around 'what next?'

Keeping the story sharing events positive by inviting people to share a story of a time when they have come together with friends or neighbours to make something better meant that the content was focussed on a 'can do' approach. Then, when issues in the community arose the approach was solution focussed with ideas for improvements emerging from the group.

"Structuring the event caused people to feel uncomfortable. The event started to flow after the simple prompt 'share your involvement within the community'. My role then was one of gentle facilitation to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to speak."

Ben, Resilient Together Community Builder



## Top Tips



Invite people who are involved in small neighbour level activity, or who have a passion for getting involved



Invite people who are from the same neighbourhood to create lasting connections and to increase the level of activity



Use a small, cosy space (as opposed to a meeting room) with tea/coffee and cake to make people feel at home, and encourage them to open up



Don't make it too structured, although, light facilitation is needed to ensure everybody gets an opportunity to speak.



## Taking Action

Our ultimate goal within the Resilient Together project was to bring people together around what they cared about, and organise themselves to take action.

We realised the process of shifting from connection and vision to actual change was ultimately down to the residents. So achieving resident-led action was, essentially, out of our control. That said, we were able to use certain techniques to influence the process.



### Being a 'Buffer'

To ensure that the action taken was truly resident led, we had to be conscious of not only our own temptations to 'do for' residents what they could do for themselves, but also the tendencies of others to do the same.

To ensure the power stayed in the hands of the residents, we occasionally had to resist or challenge the involvement of others who were unintentionally taking the power away. Being a buffer meant creating the space for residents to make their own decisions.

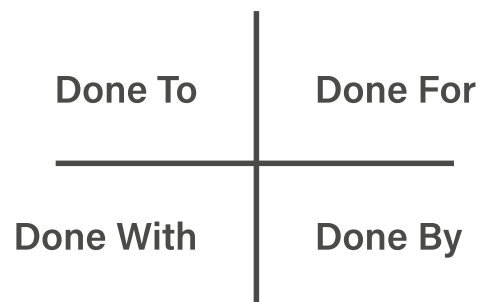
This was one of the most challenging parts of the work, but one of the most essential.

### Knowing when & how to step away

We became increasingly aware of the importance of constantly questioning our level of involvement when working with the community. While we can bring people together and support new or existing activities to build momentum, we needed to learn when to take a step back. Getting this right takes practice but is essential if community projects are to have space to recognise what is needed to support themselves and, therefore, become sustainable.

We have spent much time considering this, as it can be challenging for practitioners. It can be difficult to see something losing momentum when it's just one action away from fruition. At this point, we noticed the temptation or tendency to help was at its highest. Stepping in here would take the power away from residents, and could change the direction of the activity.

We have found Nurture Development's 'To, For, With, By' grid a useful tool to aid our reflections and help us recognise when we are doing for what residents can do for themselves. Our supper club story demonstrates how the tool can be applied in practice.



Nurture Development's 'To, For, With, By' grid

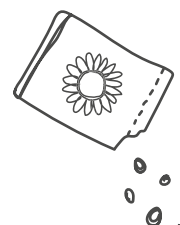


## Trumpington Supper Club

Ben, our community builder in Trumpington, had connected a number of residents who had expressed an interest in organising a community supper as a means of getting to know each other better and to rekindle the community energy. A group of seven residents met with Ben to discuss what was needed to create the supper and Ben asked who they knew that might be able to support the event. Food was sourced from Waitrose supermarket and a venue was found in the local community centre. The supper was planned and eighteen residents were invited to come.

A couple of days before the community supper one of the residents who had been integral in the organisation pulled out. Ben was faced now with a challenge, should he take more of a leading role and organise the supper or should he step back, risking that it might not take place?

Ben was driven by wanting the event to happen for the community and so, in this example, took on more organisational tasks in order for the community supper to go ahead. On reflection and using the 'To, For, With, By' tool we were able to see that we had done for and with the community in this case. If we had been working in a pure asset-based way, we should not have stepped in. We assumed that if we didn't take action, the supper wouldn't have happened, but actually we don't know this to be true. By stepping back, we may have created the space for another resident to take on the organisational role and allow the supper to be truly done by the community. Learning from the first community supper, when the second one took place Ben took a step back, allowing residents to take ownership for the event.







## Wisbech

Wisbech is a Fenland market town that has experienced a lot of change over the past few years, with a decline in its traditional industries and a rise in the agri-tech sector. The population is increasingly elderly. A third of the population are economic migrants from Eastern Europe. Wisbech has a lower percentage of people 'in employment', at 62%, than overall in the East of England.

(Source: 'Wisbech Community Led Local Development Programme: Local Development Strategy', August 2016).

These factors have led to poor community cohesion and to many groups becoming marginalised.



## Trumpington

Trumpington is a historical village in the Southern Fringe of Cambridge. There is a new housing development being built on the edge of the village, which is the size of a small new town.

With new residents constantly moving in, the exact demographic figures are unknown but there is both a high proportion of young families due to the new schools and of actively retired people due to the proximity to Addenbrookes hospital. There is a large migrant population of diverse nationalities. 40% social housing is dispersed throughout the market houses. Social housing and private renting means a greater turnover of occupants.

Different population characteristics to the surrounding area may have delayed establishing a cohesive community. Furthermore, research into new communities has established clear links between loneliness, poor mental health and antisocial behaviours, with a lack of community cohesion and social networks.

(Source: <https://www.futurecommunities.net/socialdesign/188/lack-social-infrastructure-affects-community-wellbeing>).







## Developing a Reflective Practice



Resilient Together built a network of practitioners linking with other ABCD projects across the country, with the purpose of sharing best practice through listening to their enthusiasm for asset-based community development and drawing on their learnings.

Working alongside The Barnwood Trust and Bristol City Council community development team allowed Resilient Together to develop and become reflective about its own practice.

One of the critical learnings shared by the Bristol City Council (<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/people-communities/get-involved-in-your-community>) and Barnwood Trust (<https://www.barnwoodtrust.org/>) community development teams was the value of developing a structured 'Reflective Practice' for ABCD practitioners. We found introducing this to our team as well as other local professionals led to a significant development in our work.



## What Is Reflective Practice?

Reflective practice is a way of studying your own experiences to improve the way you work. Reflecting on practice is a great way to increase confidence and become a more proactive and qualified professional. Engaging in reflective practice should help to improve the quality of the community builder's work and help close the gap between theory and practice. Creating an environment where we could reflect on our work was fundamental to ensuring that we were working in a bottom up way.

Resilient Together introduced a facilitated fortnightly reflective practice session for the project team. Each team member brings a 'dilemma' that they are facing within their community. The process of the reflective practice is to clarify the problem, ask open-ended coaching questions and challenge. This enables the community builder to process their dilemma and

come up with their own solutions to the problem. If the community builder asks for help, the group can support by drawing on their own experience and sharing it. It is then up to individual community builder to decide what is best for them and their practice.

## Opening Up Reflective Practice

Resilient Together reached out to local organisations opening up the reflective practice process extending the invitation to other community teams. Growing a network of ABCD community builders that share learning has developed both Resilient Together and other organisation's practice. It has also influenced the broader ABCD network within Cambridgeshire by sharing enthusiasm for asset-based community development and drawing on each other's feedback.



## Measures and Outcomes

The more we learnt about Asset Based Community Development, the more we realised that the residents were best placed to identify, connect and mobilise themselves. However, as we started to support residents to take responsibility for the process, we were faced with the dilemma of how to evidence our impact, and the outcomes of the interactions we encouraged.

Inevitably, with any funded work, commissioners are looking for outcomes that can be measured

to demonstrate the impact and show return on investment. As the very nature of measures conflicts with the essence of citizen-led community building, we looked into alternative methods to demonstrate our work.

Jo, Resilient Together Project Manager, reflected on this dilemma:

"In all project work there is a need for measure and outcomes. The challenge in measuring Asset Based Community Development is that a community builder cannot 'control' the results of when and how residents decide to take action. What unfolds in asset based work is the result of the community coming together and can be evidenced but not necessarily claimed by a project.

There is also a challenge in quantifying the work in a way that numbers or statistics are not able to. Numbers of conversations or special interest groups formed were not consistent measures for developing a full evidence base around the work.

Throughout the project we have learnt that case studies, story-telling and people mapping are more effective mediums for showcasing the scale and breadth of the work."

Jo, Resilient Together Project Manager





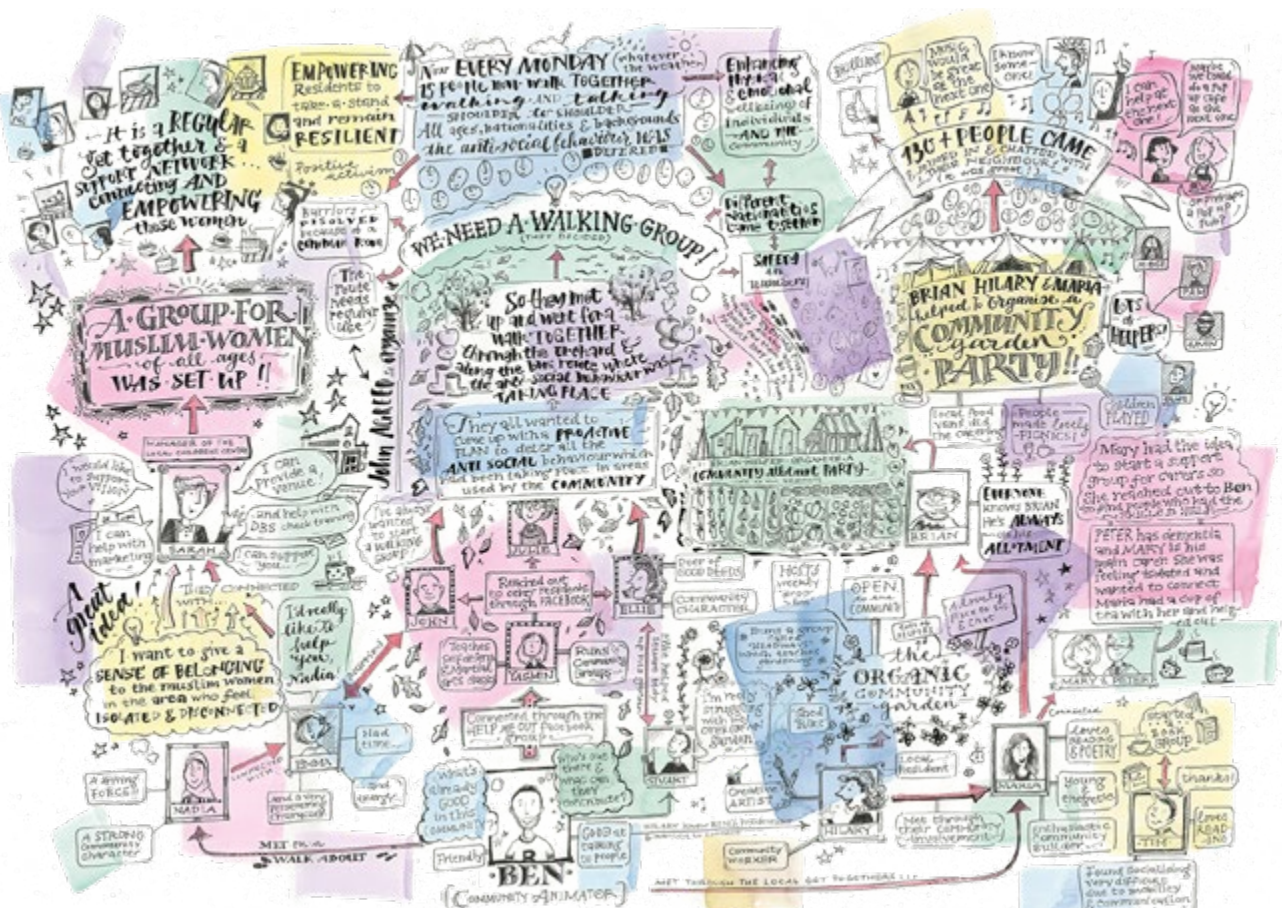
# People Mapping

A challenge faced by Resilient Together was capturing and measuring its works and achievements. The underlying principle of asset based work is empowering residents to do for themselves, and because of this much of the work from the community builders gets missed or goes under the radar.

We have learnt that measuring the street level work through numbers of asset based conversations, special interest groups formed, community connectors, Get Together events, or mental health awareness events doesn't show the breadth or meaning of the work supported by the community builders on the ground. It also failed to capture the ripple effect caused by bringing people together.

As these challenges became clearer, we sought more meaningful ways of capturing and sharing the community development work. We reached out to other ABCD professionals to learn how their organisations had dealt with this challenge. We learnt about a process called 'People Mapping'. This shows the number of people involved with the community builder and their interconnectedness, retrospectively brought to life through illustration.

People mapping places less importance on the number of connections that have been made by the community builder, and more importance on the quality of change that has emerged as a result of those connections.



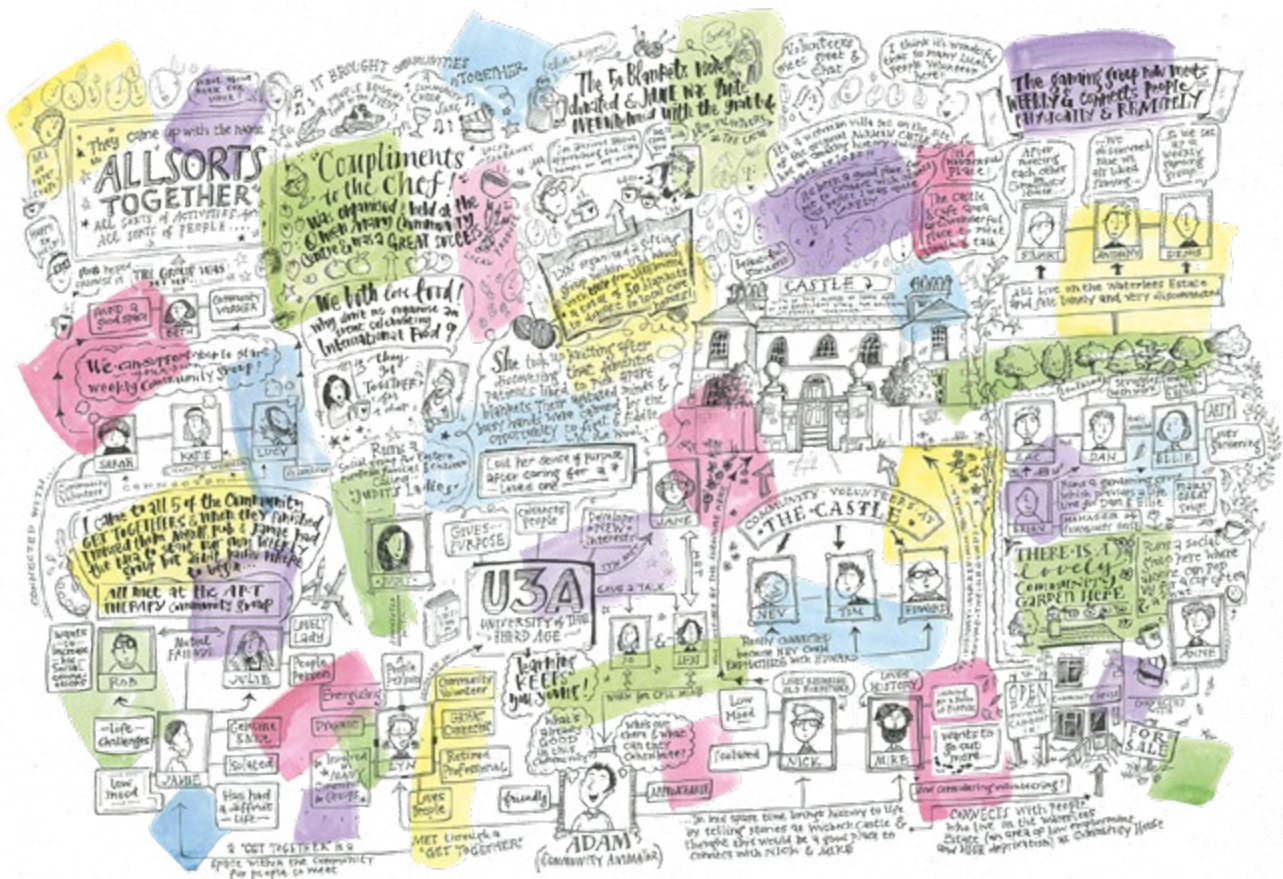


## How to create a people map

After three months in role the community builders are interviewed by a researcher using a series of 'People Mapping' prompts which are open ended questions starting with: 'Who was the first person that you met in the community?'

Whilst the community builder is being interviewed an illustrator sketches out the connections on paper. The map can then be re-created at six months, nine months and twelve months to see how the connections have grown or what has happened to the connections over time.

We recognised that this isn't the only method of capturing ABCD work but we found this to be very effective when presenting our work. (If you have found an alternative that works for you, we'd love to hear about it.)



We hope that some of our passion for the work has come across in this guide. After going through this process and recognising the effect that people coming together and contributing their gifts has on the general wellbeing of the community, the way in which our whole organisation interacts with the people we serve, as well as one another, has significantly transformed.

Going forward we want to continue to expand our ABCD knowledge, understanding, and network, to begin to embed this way of interacting with communities across Cambridgeshire, Peterborough and South Lincolnshire.

We would love to connect and share with anybody who is also inspired to develop such a vision.

To find out how to get in contact please visit our website **[www.cpslmind.org.uk](http://www.cpslmind.org.uk)**





### **Resources we have found helpful:**

Barnwood <https://www.barnwoodtrust.org/>

Nurture Development <https://www.nurtureddevelopment.org/>

Bristol <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/people-communities/get-involved-in-your-community>

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