Building community capacity through asset and strengths-based approaches – a guide for commissioners

The Care Act (2016 update) states that public services must adopt a holistic, person-centred approach, with a focus on people's wellbeing. To do this, services should move away from an emphasis on deficits or needs, and instead 'consider the person's own strengths and capabilities and what support might be available from their wider support network or within the community to help' (as stated in the Care Act).

This places commissioned adult social care services within a wider network that includes self-support, families, friends, carers and community support, with an emphasis on prevention, enablement and the promotion of independence.

For commissioners, this means taking a different approach to involving citizens and communities and considering what assets and strengths exist in the local community. This approach can support and empower people to recognise and use their strengths and assets to promote health and wellbeing and to live good lives.

We encourage citizens and communities to play their full part in keeping healthy and enabling everyone to live good lives, and hierarchical and centralised power systems don't always support this.

What is community and asset-based thinking?

The first question should be 'what does a good life look like', rather than what changes are needed to services. This leads to a fundamentally different picture of a good care and support system, described as an asset-based area. This approach to care and support is based on seeing citizens as first and foremost, and organised around the promotion of wellbeing and enabling people to be able to connect and contribute, whatever their setting, illness or disability.

This is about changing our world of work, how we use and share power, and how areas embrace communities and the services and opportunities offered therein, as part of the health and care system and public services. People who need care and support have expertise about themselves and their lives, alongside a wealth of skills and knowledge to offer the system and their community.

Communities are full of people with diverse skills, qualities and experiences, as well as formal and informal groups that contribute to community wellbeing. Working together can achieve better outcomes. Local communities understand what matters most to them, which solutions will work and how to support and invest in these to change for the better.

Working together to create resources that work for local people and delivering and evaluating the effectiveness of those resources, contributes to community engagement and sustainability, as well as ensuring the best use of resources.

In practice, this means:

- not doing for a community what it can do for itself
- identify and support resources that already exist to support wellbeing and promote community networks
- changing from servicing people's needs to facilitating their aspirations – moving away a deficit model to a strengths-based model
- redressing the balance between peoples' needs and their assets or strengths – see people as co-producers of their own health and well being
- thinking more about the underlying causes of social care needs and looking at ways to address them
- looking for solutions that are developed by people and communities, not by specialists and professionals
- empowering communities to control their futures and be creative
- identifying driven and passionate individuals in the community who could be ambassadors for change and development
- focussing on commissioning strategies that help to create healthy communities in which people can remain happy, fulfilled and independent for longer.

Top tips for adult social care commissioners: empowering communities and developing community resources

These tips will help you to think about how you can develop the resources in your community.

- Understand how your community is defined, what drives it, and what its goals are. Communities don't just 'happen' – there's usually a shared reason for them to exist. You need to understand what those reasons are for the individuals involved, as well as for the group as a whole.

  Most communities fall into one of two groups:

  - communities of place, defined by a specific geographical location
  - communities of interest, where there is a shared interest in a specific activity or issue, for example, promoting good mental health.

- Communities are rich resources - get to know yours and work with it to build the support systems that local people value. You could start by building a visual map of what resources already exist in the community - click here for an example of a community mapping graphic and download a blank template to get started. It should include the skills, qualities and experiences of local individuals and groups that can contribute to community wellbeing. This is a great way to bring people together, and can help you to start a conversation about what's working well and what other resources people want. Use this learning to inform your community development activities.

- Identify with stakeholders what the intended outcomes are for community resources, and ensure that they focus on improving the outcomes for local people. Remember that outcomes are different from outputs - outputs are the actual service(s) delivered whereas outcomes are the things that result from the outputs. For example, if someone receives two hours support at home, this is the output. However, it's more important to understand the 'outcome' i.e. how that two hours of support has improved that person's life. The 'Workforce Outcomes Measurement Model' can help.

- Involve people who need care and support, families and carers from your local community in each stage of the planning, commissioning and evaluation cycle. Find ways to engage with groups that have been under-represented in the past and avoid using over-complicated or restrictive practices that might exclude some people. Communicate in ways that are appropriate to your local community.

- Discover the key roles that communities play in creating healthy, inclusive and safe places to live. This approach isn't about reducing costs – it's about using resources intelligently on what works for your local community and the people in it.

- People want to be involved in community projects at different levels and for different amounts of time. Take a flexible approach that values all the different contributions to involvement, to encourage as many people as possible to engage in supporting their community. Community groups have their own pace and rhythm, so it's important to be flexible and adapt to work alongside them.

- Remember that even very skilled people don't always recognise what they have to offer. Part of the job in developing communities is to work with people to help them to see their own strengths and abilities and have confidence in their contribution. Understanding that everyday things to one person are valuable skills to someone else is part of that process. If people lack experience or confidence, provide support, encouragement and positive feedback.

- Use jargon free language that people will understand and relate to. Using more technical terms, like 'community facilitator' can be misunderstood and may put people off. Using jargon can make some people feel deskilled and can prevent someone from realising that the skills that they have are actually the ones that you're looking for.

- Work with other commissioners to ensure a joined-up, community focussed approach. Develop a basis for commissioning support for community development and community building – not just how activities are commissioned but what activities are commissioned.

- Use the Social Return on Investment (SROI) model to measure the outcomes of community intervention on wellbeing and explore how commissioning resources outside of traditional 'social care' resources can provide tangible benefits. It's a way of measuring the gains from developing community resources that looks beyond the immediate benefits of an intervention, to see it in the wider context of the whole community. Here are two examples of what this could include:

  Action: increase understanding of dementia with sports centre staff so that dementia friendly activity sessions can be offered.

  Value:
    - Staff feel more confident talking to and supporting people with dementia to use the sports centre.
    - People with dementia access the centre for meaningful activity, which improves their mental and physical wellbeing.
    - Carers get a regular break and feel better able to cope.

Action: develop a community allotment.

Value:

- o People have a place to meet others, which reduces isolation and loneliness,
  and improves mental health.
- o Being physically active and outside improves people's physical health.
- o People can grow fresh and healthy produce which can improve their diet.
- o People learn new/develop their skills which can increase confidence.
- o New social networks develop in the community.
- o The local physical environment is improved.

Each of these indicators can be used to demonstrate value for money.

Social Return on Investment: the benefits of community investment

Identifying and describing the benefits of community investment can be difficult, and conventional approaches to measuring 'value for money' are often not helpful.

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a principle-based method for measuring extra-financial value, which helps to show the beneficial impact of what you're doing that includes social benefits as well as 'value for money'. It measures change in ways that are meaningful to the people and organisations that contribute to, or benefit from, those changes.

You can use SROI to look at the outcomes (evaluative) of community investment, or to predict the social value that will be created by activities (forecast), which might be useful in planning, bidding and demonstrating the potential benefit of what you're hoping to do.

SROI is based on **seven principles**.

1. Involve stakeholders (the people or organisations that will experience change as a result of your activity).
2. Understand what changes (look at all of the things that happen, not just what you planned).
3. Value the outcomes that matter (not everything matters equally, find out how stakeholders see it).
4. Only include what is material (decide what information/evidence is needed to give a true, and fair picture that allows stakeholder to understand the impact).
5. Only claim the value that activities are responsible for creating (be honest about how much of any change is due to your involvement, as well as the impact of those changes).

6. Be transparent (be straightforward, and honest, show you have nothing to hide and explain what is behind any conclusions or judgements you make).
7. Verify the results (make sure that any information you use to shape your conclusions, or next steps is robust).

Use these **ten impact questions** to help you to undertake an SROI analysis.

1. What problem are we trying to solve?
2. What is our proposed solution to the problem?
3. Who experiences changes in their lives as a result of what you do?
4. What changes are (or likely to be) experienced?
5. How can we measure these changes?
6. How much of each change has happened (or is likely to happen)?
7. What is the relative importance of the different changes?
8. How much of each change is caused by our activities?
9. How long do we need to measure the changes for?
10. Which changes matter and are important enough for us to manage?

Find out more about the SROI model, including a practical guide, standards and supplements, at www.socialvalueuk.org