BUILDING ON ASSETS: THE LOCAL TRUST APPROACH

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IVAR Institute for Voluntary Action Research

1. Introduction

In IVAR's capacity as research and learning partner to Big Local, we were asked to conduct a small-scale study that would test and then elaborate Local Trust's approach to asset based community development. The study would consider what is meant by asset based community development in theory, how it plays out in practice and where it sits within the wider field of community development.

Once we began to plan the study, it became clear to us that the term 'asset based community development' risked closing down rather than opening up a conversation about what Local Trust's approach looks like in practice because it is associated with a particular 'brand' (ABCD). We therefore adopted the less snappy but looser phrase 'building on assets' in our interviews and analysis.

Here we briefly explain how 'building on assets' relates to other key terms used to describe community development.

Community development has been defined in many different ways. One current definition that combines various others comes from the Scottish Community Development Centre:

Community development is a way of strengthening civil society by prioritising the actions of communities, and their perspectives in the development of social, economic and environmental policy. It seeks the empowerment of local communities, taken to mean both geographical communities, communities of interest or identity and communities organising around specific themes or policy initiatives. It strengthens the capacity of people as active citizens through their community groups, organisations and networks; and the capacity of institutions and agencies (public, private and non-governmental) to work in dialogue with citizens to shape and determine change in their communities. It plays a crucial role in supporting active democratic life by promoting the autonomous voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable communities. It has a set of core values/social principles covering human rights, social inclusion, equality and respect for diversity; and a specific skills and knowledge base.[1]

Asset based community development is a specific strategy for sustainable community development which focuses on identifying the strengths and assets in a community and mobilises individuals, associations, and institutions to come together to build on these to take action. It pays particular attention to the assets inherent in social relationships, as evident in formal and informal associations and networks. It tends to define itself as an alternative to what it sees as traditional approaches which it sees as starting from community deficits or needs.[2]

[1] This definition is from the Scottish Community Development Centre and can be found at: scdc.org. uk/who/what-is-community-development/ [Last accessed 26 June 2015.]
[2] This definition is from the Asset Based Community Development Institute.

Our report draws on interviews with 12 Local Trust stakeholders (Local Trust's Programme Manager; four partner organisations; seven Big Local reps) as well as documents, online discussions and previous research conducted by or on behalf of Local Trust.[3]

The findings presented are a synthesis of the perceptions, opinions and experiences of those interviewed. Anonymised quotations are presented in italics throughout the report.

The report is structured as follows:

1. Introduction
2. How assets are defined by key players within Big Local
3. Key features of Big Local's approach to building on assets
4. Big Local building on assets in practice
5. Pitfalls and challenges
6. Successful features of Big Local's approach to building on assets
7. Final remarks

2. How assets are defined by key players within Big Local

Assets were defined by participants in four main ways.

A focus on seeing residents and local communities as assets themselves

Participants spoke about skills and knowledge, but also important collective assets that communities possess such as relationships and informal networks – what is often referred to as social capital. There are also more formal assets, which might include existing community groups or activities and community infrastructure.

The 'character' of an area

Somewhat less tangible was what one respondent described as the 'distinctive character of an area'. Participants said that building on assets meant *'trying to work with the grain of the identity of an area and being able to recognise a distinctive character within that'.* For example, feelings of local pride and loyalty might develop or grow through reconnecting to local history, heritage or even mythology associated with an area. By focusing on the character of their area, residents are encouraged to focus on what they have rather than that which they do not.

Hopes, aspirations and enthusiasm that residents bring to Big Local

Participants identified ideas and entrepreneurship as assets and stressed the importance of reps and partners being imaginative in drawing out the potential that might not be readily apparent to residents themselves.

[3] This included: previous research produced by IVAR as a research and learning partner to Big Local, for example IVAR (2013) What's new and different: https://www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk/resources/big-local-whats-new-and-different ;
case studies and other programme information produced by Local Trust case documents; a discussion thread on Big Local's online platform, basecamp; and policy and practitioner literature that discusses community development including ABCD.

Physical assets in an area

This final, more tangible type of asset is commonly referred to in policy, and can include, for example, a building or piece of land. Some also saw it as encompassing the value of local services as assets (real or potential depending on their responsiveness to residents).

3. Key features of Big Local's approach to building on assets

Local Trust's approach is perceived as an empowerment rather than deficit model – focused on recognising and building on strengths and assets in an area, rather than the needs and negatives. This appears to be driven, as one rep explained: *'from a fundamental belief in people – that most people have the strength to tackle their problems'.*

In practice, this means two things:

Programme managers, partners and reps identify and focus on community strengths

Recognising there is more right than wrong in most areas and supporting existing positive features/aspects rather than bringing in outside support

Residents are encouraged to look at the assets and strengths they have rather than focus on 'what's wrong or missing in their area'

'You don't have to ask them what's wrong; they'll tell you anyway. It's about getting people to find the strengths in themselves, telling stories about success, identifying the critical strength factors.'

One respondent said that this approach also means *'learning from your own and other experiences and not off the shelf tools'.* Some participants used the term 'building on assets' interchangeably with ABCD, but others were careful to differentiate, feeling that ABCD has become a 'brand' and thus inflexible:

'Currently everyone is jumping on ABCD's bandwagon but the Big Local approach is formalising what good community development has always been'.

4. Big Local building on assets in practice

This study began from a position of describing the Big Local approach as 'building on assets'. However, it became clear from interviews that, while participants saw 'building on assets' as a key part of this approach, it does not quite encapsulate the whole. Building on assets goes hand in hand with 'resident-led' – i.e. not imposing solutions from outside but growing residents as assets themselves; trusting that residents can lead and that the answers to a community's needs and aspirations lie within the community itself.

A community approach to health

In Mossley, the local community has been looking at health. They started by putting the 12 worst health indicators for their area on the wall. Then they looked at which of these could they do something about, what could they do and how could they do it. There were no answers about clinicians – **all their solutions were community solutions**, about people supporting each other.

It can also be argued that economic sustainability is integral to an asset focused approach, seeking to free people from dependency on grants where funders can dictate terms:

'It's really important that people who are leaders in community development educate themselves about economics; they really need to see economics as a central part of our skill base and our right to speak about assets.'

Participants described several ways of identifying and recognising local strengths and assets and, as we have seen, emphasised the role of partners and reps in spotting potential that residents might not be aware of themselves. Several people said that taking an asset based approach had helped them to define the questions they asked when they went into an area – for example, emphasising the positives and strengths. Among the approaches that respondents had successfully used were: Appreciative Inquiry; visual mapping exercises with residents; or community asset audits.

Preventing crime

You can approach anti-social behaviour in two ways. One is to say: 'here's a problem – crime – which we can reduce by engaging the 50 young people most at risk'. But to start from a perspective of reducing crime is less likely to work than an approach which sees young people in the area as an asset, as important in the community, giving them opportunities, raising their confidence. **If you put good stuff in, good stuff will come out.**

5. Pitfalls and challenges

Overall, respondents were very positive about the Big Local approach to building on assets: *'It is brilliant at getting people out of the woodwork!'* A respondent commented that using this approach means that Big Local achievements are genuinely those of the residents rather than *'highly paid consultants'.*

However, respondents also recognised the challenges inherent in this approach. In this section we outline the six key challenges raised by study participants.

Focusing on assets at the expense of other important issues or dynamics

Participants raised the risk of placing all responsibility with community members and ignoring the deeper roots of the disadvantage that many areas experience. This is a criticism that has been well rehearsed in critiques of ABCD in the literature[4], but some were worried it might apply to this programme too:

'Solely focusing on assets and the positives can overlook barriers, power differentials, the disadvantages of these areas in terms of poverty, morbidity, mortality, educational attainment. To raise this sometimes seems a bit anti the asset based approach, but there are contradictions: if we are talking about long-term change, it is not just parks and maternity service – it's about children not coming to school ready to learn. Does Big Local allow us to think about that enough?'

'It can be used as a way to dampen down social and political activism … I do also want to encourage people to say this isn't right and we want something done about it.'

Participants were also concerned that building on assets shouldn't mean **turning a blind eye to real problems.** In particular, some perceived a reluctance to look at difficulties and problems in the Programme and there not being enough opportunity for reps to share their experience and support each other in that. There was concern too, that Big Local partnerships might become too inward looking and not think about, or be prepared, to build bridges beyond their own area.

Flexibility can be challenging

Sometimes it is difficult to change residents' mindsets – or indeed, those of others on the partnership who are used to more formal ways of working. One rep described the challenge created by people viewing Big Local as a 'thing' rather than a 'process'; another argued that:

'At a community level, some people are more comfortable when things are structured. It's difficult being told you can do what you like. Residents may be worried about getting things wrong or not doing things by the book because it is all so new.'

There was also some concern over the weight of responsibility on volunteers, for example, *'if something goes wrong on a coach trip, will they get sued'?*

The familiar question of what is meant by 'resident-led'?

While Local Trust has made it clear that they are not looking for 'representativeness', they do want the residents they are working with to reflect the area in which they live. However, some Big Local partnerships *'struggle at involving a wider group of people'* and participants emphasised the need to refresh the core partnership in order to ensure Big Local reflected diversity in local populations. They also questioned whether the Programme gave enough attention to potential conflicts and tensions in local areas.

[4] See for example, Gilchrist, A. and Taylor, M. (2011) The short guide to community development, Bristol: Policy Press, p.23

Managing the fine line between resident-led and resident only

There were also some areas where residents interpreted **resident-*led*** as meaning **resident *only***: believing that they should do everything:

'The local area has very much taken on the idea of being resident-led, but sometimes to the detriment of bringing other agencies on board. So they are missing out on support and potential match funding.'

'Asset based doesn't mean communities doing everything for themselves.'

Linked to this, participants felt that there are also times when residents need to be challenged – for example, about racism or stereotyping:

'The comments people make are not always malicious. They come out of lack of awareness, so we will talk about training and support. It's up to the rep to distinguish between that and using language to bully and intimidate … working with others to explain how their behaviour might make people feel.'

One rep described the ideal as *'having working parties convened and chaired by residents who have the confidence to say these are our meetings but still to involve others'*. The ability to achieve this was affected by existing power dynamics in an area and by how active and experienced local residents were already.

Finally, some reps felt residents took on too much and worried about them burning out:

'I expected the area to commission more and leave more to other people. On the contrary, there has been an unwillingness even to pay a worker, even though these are people who are not time rich. People are so passionate, they will do anything to be part of decision-making.'

Change takes time

It can take time to change the way Big Local partnerships think about and approach their area, and to develop residents' confidence in the assets they bring to the Big Local approach. Residents can become impatient and local partners may see this time-consuming process as inefficient. One respondent wondered whether there may have been a better way to manage expectations around this from the outset:

'For a community, it takes time and people are impatient for change. Community engagement is not a doddle.'

Sustainability of resident-led approaches

A particular risk identified by participants was that the focus on assets could get lost if partnerships contract out some of the work to deliver their Big Local plan. One person explained:

'The danger is that the dynamic transfers to the organisations that are paid to deliver and are driving things forward. Will there be a tendency then to deliver to need rather than opportunities?'

As the Programme develops, it will become even more important to embed an asset building and resident-led approach locally; even in the small number of interviews carried out for this study there were areas where local partners still don't 'get' it.

6. Successful features of Big Local's approach to building on assets

The findings highlight three features of the Big Local approach which appear to be contributing to successful implementation.

Firstly, there was praise for Local Trust for 'holding its nerve' in terms of values and principles. Participants argued that a critical factor in the way they approached their role has been the **upbeat language** Local Trust has adopted. Existing guidance also emphasises an assets-focused approach, *'questions about what you love about your area rather than what's wrong'*. As one rep said:

'I spent a lot of time getting the residents to emphasise what was good about the area. I might not have done that if Local Trust hadn't emphasised the positives.'

Secondly, the **time and space** Local Trust has allowed for the development of plans has been beneficial: 'the length of the programme is key – giving us time to deliver the change expected'. Closely linked to this is the Programme's **flexibility**. Participants thought this was critical and was made easier by Local Trust's independence from Government. This flexibility, which is enshrined in the Trust Deed, is central to Local Trust's approach: recognition that every place will be different; that it needs to be open to the unexpected; responsive and able to take residents in many directions: *'There are changes in areas' support needs and wants already'.*

Finally, participants referred to the **structure of support** that has been put in place. There were four key characteristics here:

Light touch support

The use of reps that are there for residents but not taking the lead: *'We* [Local Trust] *continue to challenge reps on how much they do themselves. There are still some that find it difficult to step back. It comes from being so committed to growing the partnership, they're over involved, they want to see stuff happen'.*

The use of Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs) to hold the grant agreement

'This model is liberating and transparent and is only possible because of the LTO holding the money'.

The emphasis on investment and enterprise

For example, the Programme can develop additional routes into an area, by working with social entrepreneurs and also building other partnerships to bring in additional resources through the local economy pilots.

Peer to peer learning

Residents learning from residents locally and in other Big Local areas. This can be a particularly good way of alerting residents to things they haven't thought about or getting them to realise what they don't know without them feeling dependent on professional expertise, but it always gives them an opportunity to realise what they do know and can share.

7. Final remarks

There was considerable praise for Local Trust having held its nerve through the early years of the programme: asserting its vision and values; concentrating on the assets in every Big Local area; and convincing partners, reps and people locally of the potential for resident-led change. This report has identified pitfalls and challenges. But the issues raised are by no means a dismissal of the approach – participants were very clear about that. Put simply, these challenges remind us that there are tensions and choices in any approach to community development that seeks to build on and be guided by resident strengths. These are the tensions between support and interference; between being resident-led and resident-only; between leadership and participation; between being positive while recognising the deeper roots of some local problems. The learning that is emerging from Local Trust's experience of adopting this approach will therefore be crucial not only to the future of Big Local but to community development elsewhere.

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