

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information about any of the issues mentioned in this learning point please use the contact details listed here.

You can also ask for this publication in large print, Braille or on audio cassette, and we can also provide translations into other languages. Please contact Janette Campbell on 0131 479 5162 or email her at janette.campbell@communitiescotland.gsi.gov.uk for further information.

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Asset Based Community Development Institute of Northwestern University:

www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd.html
(click on 'publications' for links to tools, studies and articles)

Building Communities from the Inside Out:

A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets, John P Kretzman and John L McKnight. A book with over 3,000 people's stories about what others have done to make their communities better.

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Learning point 6:

Asset based community development: making the most of a community's strengths

What are learning points?

Learning points are a new series of publications designed to share the lessons learned from regeneration activities, research and evaluation. They are one of the ways in which Communities Scotland's Scottish Centre for Regeneration passes on what people learn from working and talking together. It records what discussions were about, what questions participants hoped to have answered, what questions they felt were answered, and what useful working principles emerged. Learning points encourage good practice and networking, build up a picture of what is happening in the field, and keep a record of participants' experiences. We hope they will help communities discover what has worked in other areas and what might work for them.

What is this learning point about?

This learning point discusses the work of the Asset Based Community Development Institute in Chicago, and in particular the work of John McKnight and his colleagues there, to examine how public sector organisations look at communities and how communities look at themselves, and how bringing these two elements together leads to effective community development.

Asset based community development means building on a community's existing assets.

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Such assets might include the skills of local residents, the power of local groups, the resources of public, private and non-profit organisations and physical and economic resources.

Asset based community development challenges the traditional approach to solving urban and rural problems, where service providers and funding agencies focus on the needs and deficiencies of a local area. Instead, it considers community assets to be key building blocks in sustainable urban and rural community regeneration efforts.

Where did this learning point come from?

A masterclass was held in Glasgow in 2004 by Communities Scotland's Scottish Centre for Regeneration to help people in Scotland think about ways to build on the assets they have in their communities and to suggest how to apply the asset based community development approach effectively in Scotland. It included a presentation by John McKnight and familiarisation with some of the tools he and his team developed, and provided an opportunity for participants to generate ideas on how to apply these tools to their own community situations.

What issues were examined?

Using the tools John McKnight and his team have developed, the group explored the following questions:

- *Understanding your partners* – how do public sector organisations look at communities?
- *Releasing capacity* – how do communities look at themselves?
- *Respecting the community* – what behaviour brings the two viewpoints together?
- *Developing visions* – what action leads to successful community change?
- *Discovering opportunities* – how do we apply the asset based community development principle in Scotland?

What underlying principles did people identify?

- We usually describe communities by listing all their problems. This is the 'map' with which policy

makers start, especially for communities that have lived with economic and social difficulties. Communities frequently use the same map because this is how they have heard themselves described.

- Starting with the assets instead of the deficits makes the more useful assumption that people in the community can be, and want to be, part of the solution – not the problem.
- The power to release the capacity of communities comes from the residents themselves, and this power is greater when people form groups and gather for a shared purpose, whether paid or unpaid.
- Community development occurs when people understand the potential of their local assets, make connections between the assets, encourage others to take action, and respect each other and participating organisations.
- It takes time to get people on board. Forming a network of associations can bring in more people as well as existing members' contacts.
- All groups are relevant, no matter what their remit or size.
- Groups tend to be formed either in response to crisis or when a community organiser does the work of bringing people together. Organisers can get others to take on responsibilities by asking 'What is your group doing that makes the community better?', following with the question 'Here is a list of things that might make this community better: what would you like to do?'
- You don't know what you need until you know what you have. A needs survey will not prove useful as it focuses on problems and deficits and strengthens the powers of establishment organisations, undermines the morale of community groups and makes participants feel overwhelmed. A neighbourhood vision is a more positive way to begin.
- A neighbourhood vision should be specific and include plans to make sure participants have the skills they need.
- Combine the action of both community groups and public sector organisations by asking them what they plan to do to assist with the tasks

involved in creating the vision. Such assistance could include grants, office space, or activities. Their combined actions will meet most of what the community needs. What is still lacking can come from outside the community – from banks, government and larger organisations.

- Power comes from working from within – the community sets the agenda and invites others to join and work with it.

What problems or barriers did people identify?

Communities face a number of problems when working with their assets:

- *People* – communities too often accept the negative view of themselves which leads to a lack of confidence and operating out of fear.
- *Experience* – people do not share personal experience effectively with groups or organisations other than those they are a member of.
- *Resources* – community organisations are trapped in short-term funding cycles.
- *Structures* – instead of looking at the long term, community organisations often plunge headlong into new initiatives in their search for solutions, and also tend to veer quickly toward solutions identified by 'experts'.
- *Policy and mindset* – policy usually focuses on needs and negatives. Official bodies appear to want to remain in control and can be apparently unwilling to share power.

What did people learn from all of this?

In Scotland, many opportunities for asset based community development already exist. For example, participants identified:

- *People* – people in communities and associations who are already committed to asset-based principles, such as professional regeneration and community development workers.
- *Experience* – local people with skills and experience and knowledge of planning tools such as 'Planning for Real'; people who are involved in community engagement processes and experienced in genuinely successful regeneration.

- *Resources* – existing private sector investment, for example in housing regeneration, and the resources of Communities Scotland.
- *Structures* – community planning structures; Councils of Voluntary Service with information about local associations; current local authority and NHS policies encouraging participation; people's personal contributions.
- *Policy and mindset* – many people in communities already have good ideas and a desire for change, and possess information that can be used as a powerful resource.

How can we tackle problems and implement the asset based community development approach?

Start by asking:

- Can you recognise the resources and assets you already have and encourage people to describe issues, opportunities and potential partners in an asset-based way?
- Can you invest more time and effort in exploring issues and finding people who can contribute?
- Even if someone from outside the area has decided the agenda, can you implement it using asset based community development tools and ideas?
- If you work for an organisation such as a local authority, can you work within current policies and practices to build on community assets rather than on deficits?
- If you think outcome measurements for a programme are negative, unsustainable or not helpful, can you suggest other, asset-based, measures instead?

