Executive Summary

Building Community Capacity and Resilience

Evaluation Findings from a Two-Year Practice
and Research Collaboration in Gloucestershire

Executive Summary

This summary presents evaluation findings from a collaboration between four partner organisations in Gloucestershire which sought to promote asset- and strengths-based approaches. Gloucestershire Constabulary, Barnwood Trust, Gloucester City Council, and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner formed the partnership with the collective aim of working together to empower citizen-led action to make Gloucestershire a great place to live.

This involved seconding PCSOs and a City Council employee to Barnwood Trust's Community Building Team to practice Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) in particular, as well as providing workshops on strengths-based approaches for a variety of professionals working in statutory and voluntary organisations in Gloucester[1]. These initiatives sought to promote a new way of working and to support local people to build their collective capacity and resilience.

The following collective objectives united the four partner organisations:

- Healthier communities;
- Improved community safety;
- Welcoming and inclusive neighbourhoods
- Citizens taking control over their own lives; and
- Places where people can come together.

The research methods were designed to collect data over an 18-month period that could evidence whether these initiatives were contributing towards the objectives being met. Researchers from Gloucestershire Constabulary and Barnwood Trust collected quantitative and qualitative data in two sites where community building and strengths-based problem-solving activities were taking place, as well as in two comparison sites. Both residents and professionals participated in the research to document the process, reach and impact of their involvement.

This summary shares key findings from the initiatives in relation to two main areas: Ways of Working and Impact for Residents and Community.

Ways of Working

Professionals who participated in the research were asked to share their views on and experiences of working in asset- and strengths-based ways. This included the Community Builders on secondment to Barnwood Trust to practice ABCD, as well as the professionals attending training on strengths-based approaches.

For those professionals who took part in the strengths-based workshops, a variety of common themes emerged within the data in the experiences they reported of working in this way, including a range of **opportunities** and **challenges**. The challenge of implementing strengths-based practices when working in a reactive and response-focused environment was cited, as well as being demand-driven and a lack of capacity.

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[1]Asset-Based Comunity Development (ABCD) was understood to come under the broader category of strengths-based approaches.

Organisational culture and **sufficient time to meaningfully engage with the community** were consistent themes identified across different data sets as being important conditions in enabling asset- and strengths-based approaches to be adopted.

A range of **personal and professional impacts** were described by those working in asset- and strengths-based ways as part of this project. For workshop attendees, this included feeling more able to describe the composition of local communities. Those seconded to Barnwood Trust's Community Building Team reported growing in confidence commenting, for example, that *'I'm not a number anymore.'*

The duration of personal and professional impacts appeared to be **particularly pronounced** for those who were seconded to work as Community Builders at Barnwood Trust. Reflections shared by the Community Builders, which highlight the professional learning generated through this process, include the comments of one seconded PCSO who described how *'I see the person now, not the crime.'*

In contrast, reference to strengths-based approaches was less prominent in how workshop attendees responded to scenario-based questions a year after the training took place. This indicates that for those professionals **where the intervention was in the form of workshops rather than secondment, changing practices appeared to be less sustained over time.** This may be due to the conditions and organisational culture in which these professionals were working, in contrast to the seconded Community Builders who were working away from their usual environment. It may also indicate the need for learning to be reinforced over time.

Within the report, the case study of the **Echoes#2 youth group** and other examples of workshop attendees adopting strengths-based practices indicates the impact that this work can have for residents and local communities. The case study of the youth group in particular, which has now been running for over two years, suggests that **when a professional's focus is based primarily on the interests and strengths of the community – and activities are established in partnership with local residents – their involvement is more likely to be sustainable in the long-term.**

Overall, the findings relating to ways of working include that:
- **Certain conditions** were felt to be important in enabling asset- and strengths-based approaches to be adopted by these professionals including:
  - Organisational culture, working practices and environment; and
  - Sufficient time and capacity to meaningfully engage with the community.
- **Professional and personal impacts** were reported by individuals now working in asset- and strengths-based ways, including:
  - Better knowledge about communities and strengths-based approaches to problem solving;
  - Hands-on experience of putting asset- and strengths-based approaches into practice;
  - Feeling better able to describe the composition of local communities;
  - Improved confidence and satisfaction with their work and
  - Feeling less frustrated by their job

Impact for Residents and Community

Residents participated in the research in a range of ways including via the Gloucestershire-wide Local Policing Survey, as well as interviews with individuals directly involved in community building activity. This was supplemented by interviews with the Community Builders.

The findings of the survey in particular provide **statistically significant evidence for the value of both professional and personal relationships, and their positive impact on perceptions of community cohesion, wellbeing, life satisfaction and, more broadly, perceptions of the police and fear of crime.** Analysis of the survey highlighted the interrelatedness of these domains, as well as indicating the value that participation in community groups and access to services has in contributing to improved outcomes in all of these areas. Although residents' perceptions of cohesion, wellbeing and life satisfaction did not increase universally across all the community building sites within the initial 18 months, the survey findings highlight the importance of initiatives which promote community connectivity in contributing to these domains. The report explores the operating context and demographics in each of the different sites which may account for the disparity in findings between areas.

Evidence gathered from interviews with residents living in the community building sites, who were involved in a range of groups, events and activities complements the survey findings. **All 10 residents who were interviewed identified a range of positive impacts, for themselves and/or other residents,** including establishing new relationships, taking part in new activities, and the value of involvement in feeling able to cope (for example, with a health condition). Examples were also given of how community events had been inclusive of people from a range of different backgrounds, such as by being free to attend or to take part in.

Residents in both community building sites also spoke about the role that community involvement, including events and groups, played in **contributing to feelings of cohesion** in an area. Recognising that the notion of cohesion is complex, multi-faceted and contested, the research focused on the perceptions and views of local residents, rather than seeking to measure any one definition of cohesion to see if it had increased or decreased. Residents living in these diverse areas spoke of organising and taking part in events and how *'you put everybody together on a day like that and it transcends language.'*

More broadly, the findings also indicated that community building can lead to **increased trust and confidence between residents and professionals.** The evidence suggests that Community Builders were trusted and accepted by the residents they engaged with and that these individual relationships also contributed to **improved perceptions of the police more generally**.

Overall, the research provides evidence for the **impact that working in asset- and strengths-based ways can have at both an individual and community level**. Key findings include:

- **The personal impact of involvement in community groups, events and activities on:**
  - Wellbeing; and
  - Life satisfaction.
- **The broader impact that meaningful connectivity has at community level on:**
  - Perceptions of cohesion; and
  - Fear of crime.

- **The impact of involvement and interactions on residents' perceptions of agencies on:**
  - The likelihood of local residents reporting crime;
  - Local residents' perceptions of police; and
  - Local residents' trust and confidence of receiving a good service.

Conclusion

The findings of the research suggest that these initiatives to promote asset- and strengths-based approaches have **contributed towards the five objectives** which formed the basis of the collaboration. Examples of evidence supporting each objective is given below.

In relation to the objective of developing **Healthier Communities**, evidence from this research highlights the value that involvement in community groups, activities and events had on residents' wellbeing and life satisfaction. This finding from the Local Policing Survey in particular is supported by qualitative data from residents themselves, who shared examples of their involvement in the community and the positive impact it had for them, including one resident citing that it *'all helps me to keep going.'* Benefits for professionals of working in this way included feeling less frustrated and having increased confidence in their work.

Data from multiple sources also indicates a contribution towards the second objective of **Improved Community Safety**. In both sites where community building took place, there were statistically significant increases in residents reporting in the Local Policing Survey that the police would treat them fairly and with respect. Residents interviewed in both areas also spoke about the value of community events and groups in improving perceptions of community cohesion.

Within the report, examples of community groups, events and activities (supported through the two initiatives) being financially affordable and attended by a diverse range of residents suggests a contribution towards the third objective of developing **Welcoming and Inclusive Neighbourhoods**. Such groups, events and activities included a community café which was established following a neighbourhood get together where residents discussed what they would like to happen in the local area. The idea for the Echoes#2 youth group also emerged following a World Café event and resident-run fun day. Both of these examples, supported by professionals involved in the two initiatives, provide evidence of a contribution towards the fourth and fifth objectives of **Citizens taking Control over their Lives** and of developing **Places where People can Come Together**.

Overall, the findings from a range of methods after 18 months indicate that the two initiatives have made a contribution towards each of the collective objectives, with positive impacts for both professionals and residents. Going forwards, there is scope for further research to track any long-term benefits. It would also be of value to explore how asset- and strengths-based approaches are applied in a wider variety of contexts, conditions and across multiple agencies, and any associated impact.

For more information about this research, please contact:

Amy Dyde – Gloucestershire Constabulary (Dyde.Amy@gloucestershire.pnn.police.uk)

Roz Warden – Barnwood Trust (roz.warden@barnwoodtrust.org)

Dan Jacques – Barnwood Trust (dan.jacques@barnwoodtrust.org)