

NEW THINKING

Short papers, big ideas

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY- CENTRED PUBLIC SERVICES

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About the Author

Cormac is a social explorer, an author, and a much sought-after speaker, trainer, and consultant. He is the Founding Director of Nurture Development and a member of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute at DePaul University, Chicago. Over the last 29 years, Cormac's work has demonstrated an enduring impact in 38 countries worldwide. He has trained communities, agencies, NGOs, and governments in ABCD and other community-based approaches in Africa, Asia, Australia/Oceania, Europe, and North America. Cormac has worked extensively across the UK over the last twenty years, and he and his team at Nurture Development are working closely with public sector organisations in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

His most recent books are [The Connected Community- Discovering the Health, Wealth, and Power of Neighborhoods](#) (Coauthor John McKnight); Berrett-Koehler Publishers, (2022), and [Rekindling Democracy – A Professional's Guide to Working in Citizen Space](#); Cascade Books, (2020). Cormac's TEDx talk can be viewed [here](#)

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Foreword

The challenges facing our public services are well recognised: constrained finances, rising demand, and an ever-widening democratic deficit. In response, policy solutions abound: a switch spend of resource, a renewed efficiency drive, an organisational restructure here or there.

But what if the route to sustainability rests in the deeper, messier and less headline-grabbing challenge of institutional renewal? Not replacing or simply even just refunding services, but rather radically reorientating how they work with communities, and all the assumptions, incentives, cultures and behaviours which underpin that relationship. This is at once simpler and more complex – and is at the heart of the case Cormac sets out here, drawing on his deep asset-based community development expertise.

Our system of public services grapples with legacy features of previous eras. Large scale, machine-like bureaucracies were originally designed to administer services in a paternalistic style. Over recent decades, the injection of market-style efficiencies has sought to make this experience more customer-focused and reduce unit-costs of provision. New Local's *The Community Paradigm* explored the limits of these traditional state and market models in today's era of complexity, which realises diminishing returns if people are assumed merely to be passive recipients of a pre-determined transaction. We identified a new paradigm emerging from the practice of pioneering local authorities and elsewhere, anchored in the relationships, assets and participation of communities themselves. This think-piece builds on this urgent case for change.

In today's volatile and uncertain world, communities are at the sharp end of experiencing the consequences of complex, interwoven challenges which manifest in different ways locally. Socio-economic factors such as rising inequality, the decline of local anchor industries and demographic shifts result in persistently poor outcomes in many areas. The impacts of global phenomena are not evenly distributed: from pandemics to climate change; and from rapid inward migration to international financial shocks. These factors are all compounded by a depleted civic space, with reduced levels of funding and increasingly toxic online public discourse.

In this context, the decline in levels of trust in institutions has long been observed – as technocratic, top-down responses fall short of expectations and circumstances. Increasingly, apathy is turning into anger and rejection of the established status quo – a phenomenon we have lived uncomfortably with in

the decade since the Brexit vote to “take back control” and more recently in May 2025 local election results which indicated the resonance of populist narratives with many.

So how can the fate of communities shift from being on the receiving end of external factors, to being more meaningfully in control? How can their influence, insight and perspective become an active, ongoing part of our statecraft – the way decisions are made, resource is allocated, services are designed? This think-piece makes a valuable contribution to how we might reorient institutions towards communities and seek a better alignment between the two: with the former the servant of the latter. This isn't to sugar coat the reality whereby some communities can be in tension with others, or to downplay the enduring role of the state which will sometimes be an arbiter and always must embody universal principles of fairness and justice. Rather, it is to observe that the complexity and interconnectedness of the challenges facing communities requires a fundamental shift from institutionally-centric to community-centred practice: rooted in their particular assets, capabilities and opportunities.

There is no more timely moment to explore the potential of community-centred public services – with public service reform a Government priority and big changes in motion that will alter the local governance landscape. As Local Government Reform (LGR) will produce entirely new local institutions, how can community-centred practice be hardwired into new operating models and norms? Within a new English strategic devolution framework, how can the principle of subsidiarity embed a power shift that reaches the grassroots? If we are to recognise the neighbourhood as the primary unit of change, how can public services effectively organise at this level and recast their relationship with communities? Underpinning these questions is the importance of national government recognising its own role in nurturing that precious relationship between communities and local institutions – where citizen and state meet.

This think-piece makes a valuable contribution to the growing movement for community-powered practice and change, articulating a way forward and challenging long-held assumptions. We at New Local are delighted to be able to host it, with deep thanks to Cormac for his insights and generosity throughout our collaboration.

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May 2025

Introduction: Understanding Community Power

“The State should offer security for service and contribution. The State in organising security should not stifle incentive, opportunity, responsibility; in establishing a national minimum, it should leave room and encouragement for voluntary action by each individual to provide more than that minimum for himself and his family [sic].” – The Beveridge Report, official title: Social Insurance and Allied Services (1942)²

Public servants at their best are allies to communities (by which I mean citizens and their associations) and enablers of community-led change.³ In today’s era of social fragmentation and strained public resources, the challenge lies not in public services *doing more with less* but in ensuring optimal alignment between communities and institutions so they can co-create a preferred future. Just as citizens are more than voters or consumers, public servants are more than mere policy makers or service providers; they are civic professionals working in institutions that serve the common good.⁴ Public servants are not solely providers of services to pools of needy consumers; they are essential supporters of community power and co-facilitators of democracy, driven by a strong public service ethic.

My basic argument in this *think piece* for New Local is that certain things are best done with citizens and their associations in the lead, some of which they can do alone, and some may require support from outside agencies, taking on the role of a useful outsider or an “alongsider”. Here, government at each level does well to ensure those partnerships are well governed and benefit communities most. Communities, at the same time, must organise to ensure that such socio-economic contracts are collaborative and democratic, and may dissent when they are not. Still, there are other functions that governments and professionals with specialised expertise in public services are best placed to do; in such instances, the government does well to support and adequately resource those specialists in doing that work collaboratively, effectively, and transparently.

¹ See New Local and their work on the Community Paradigm for Public Services: <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/community-paradigm/>

² Beveridge, William. “*Social Insurance and Allied Services*”. (In pg. 6) Policy Commons.

³ See for example Blaženović, N., Muhić, E., & Jurida, S. H. (2023). LEADING BY SERVING: EXPLORATION AND USE OF THE “LEADER IS SERVANT” METAPHOR. *Društvena i tehnička istraživanja*, 2, (In pp. 114-136).

⁴ Russell, C. (2020). *Rekindling Democracy: A Professional’s Guide to Working in Citizen Space*: Cascade Books.

Here, I will emphasise the transformational power of *institutions* when they adopt an asset-based, community-first culture and approach. I will also describe how such allyship manifests in the policies and practices of some institutions across the UK, including an in-depth case study of Leeds City Council and its Asset-Based Community Development approach to Adult Social Care. Before I proceed, however, I must acknowledge that there are inevitable dilemmas in adopting an asset-based community-first approach to public services. Communities are not homogeneous or static; they reflect diverse experiences, localities, and tensions, evolving as their populations/members change and circumstances shift. Therefore, if an institution chooses to adopt a community-first approach, it is engaging in a courageous act by committing to work developmentally and relationally in a hyper-local manner, involving engagement beyond the walls of its institution within local communities.

Working in an asset-based, community-first manner is challenging for many institutions, as they are not cohesive entities. Structural factors can influence institutional behaviours, ranging from siloed approaches to top-down mandates that compel them to organise their services in institution-centric ways. Many public services are governed and funded in ways that can mitigate against community-first policies and practices. Still, the local public sector in the UK is populated by individuals who have actively chosen a career dedicated to serving, driven by a desire to effect change for the common good. This paper explores how we can rebalance and reset the relationship between our public institutions and community associations to ensure effective alignment, enabling local associations and institutions to fulfil their functions through mutual alliance.

Given the inevitable dilemmas in pursuing a community-first approach, it is essential to acknowledge that perfect alignment between institutions and associations does not exist. Notions of idealised best practice risk getting in the way of genuine efforts to cultivate better practice through good-faith exploration and reflective practice. In seeking better practice, our true north must be “good enough alignment,” since perfection is beyond our grasp. Such alignment declares itself at the speed of trust; it is not a programme that institutions deliver to passive communities, nor a strategy that can be contained between the covers of a report. Good enough alignment is a form of dynamic and ongoing social contracting between institutions and associations.

It is helpful to think of institutions and associations as tools for change to conceptualise what good enough alignment might look like. One is necessarily institutional in its orientation, while the other is community-based. That said, institutions can be community-oriented when their culture lends itself to policies and practices that foreground the priorities of the communities they serve, while sublimating their institutional interests. Institutional and associational assets are essential to getting the job of integrated sustainable development done; neither is sufficient on its own. Hence, the central question of this paper: *How can we better align the assets of our institutions and the assets of our communities so everyone can thrive, and communities can flourish?* This is an essential question in times such as these, when public trust in institutions is so low⁵. Yet, expectations on institutions and their practitioners are increasing.

In *Health is Made at Home, Hospitals are for Repairs*,⁶ Nigel Crisp, a former head of the National Health Service (NHS) in England, contends that health cannot be secured solely through better access to healthcare services, regardless of how well funded and irrespective of whether these services are related directly to health, including mental health or the broader political and social determinants of health. Crisp is saying simply that the doctor cannot deliver health to us on their own; it takes a village, so to speak. The same argument can be made about education, social care, housing, justice, safety, and other public service areas of 'delivery'. When members of the public come to believe that their health is solely in the hands of a doctor, their child's education is the sole responsibility of a classroom teacher or headteacher, and that the responsiveness of uniformed emergency services determines their safety and care, they are enthralled by the assumption that institutions hold a monopoly on the production of services that, when dutifully consumed, produce well-being.⁷ It is an assumption that can never be fulfilled, leading to disappointment among community members and increased burnout among professionals. Hence, creating a better alignment between institutions and civic associations is essential for all concerned.

⁵ UK Community Life Survey 2021/2022: In 2021/22, 27% of respondents either definitely or tended to agree that they personally can influence decisions affecting their local area. This is similar to 2020/21. This figure has not varied much over the last 8 years since data collection began. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202122/community-life-survey-202122-civic-engagement-and-social-action>

⁶ See Crisp, N (2020). *Health is Made at Home, Hospitals are for Repairs*: Salus Publishers.

⁷ Anderson, J., & Baldwin, C. (2017). Building Well-Being: Neighbourhood Flourishing and Approaches for Participatory Urban Design Intervention. In R. Phillips & C. Wong (Eds.), *Handbook of Community Well-Being Research* (pp. 313-337). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Institutions & associations

Community-oriented institutions respect the distinctive nature of associations. They see communities as a gardener sees a garden, not as an engineer sees a machine. Adopting a community-first approach, they view associations as having autonomy and distinct ways of operating apart from institutions while also being interdependent with them.⁸ Community-oriented institutions view associations as complex adaptive systems for achieving societal well-being. In this paper, the following broad descriptors for associations and institutions are:

Associations emphasise care and mutual support among members.⁹ They thrive on a smaller, localised level and rely on active contributions from members. Leadership is distributive, and structures are intentionally disaggregated. Trust is the adhesive that holds associations together.

Institutions focus on producing goods and services.¹⁰ They prioritise manageability, scalability, and measurability. Institutions provide structure and stability to society, promoting social norms and values and fulfilling needs across diverse populations. Institutional structures tend to be centralised, and leadership is often arranged hierarchically to ensure consistent standards and quality.

Both are different operating systems where humans organise themselves and their resources to achieve various outputs and outcomes. Many societal problems arise from applying the wrong "operating system" to an issue. This observation echoes psychologist Abraham Maslow's *law of the instrument* (1966), where he notes, "It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to see every problem as a nail."¹¹ In the context of institutions, relying solely on institutionally oriented approaches may lead to viewing every societal issue as a deficit needing a predetermined solution. Community-oriented public services aim to shift policy and practice from institutions that inadvertently displace community power to those that support and supplement it, ensuring better alignment across all levels of community, economic, and environmental development.

⁸ See Emmett, E. A., Zhang, H., Shofer, F. S., Rodway, N., Desai, C., Freeman, D., & Hufford, M. (2009). Development and Successful Application of a "Community-First" Communication Model for Community-based Environmental Health Research. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 51(2). Retrieved from https://journals.lww.com/joem/fulltext/2009/02000/development_and_successful_application_of_a.3.aspx for a detailed discussion of the application of a "community-first" approach in Environmental Health Research.

⁹ See Warren, M. E. (2021). *Democracy and Association*: Princeton University Press for a detailed discussion on the importance of associations in a liberal democracy.

¹⁰ See Raco, M., & Flint, J. (2001). Communities, places and institutional relations: assessing the role of area-based community representation in local governance. *Political geography*, 20.5, 585–612.

¹¹ See Maslow, A. H. (1966). *The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance*. In (pp. 15–16): Harper & Row.

Good enough alignment results from a consistent commitment at all levels to the principle of subsidiarity. Consequently, central government institutions must commit to the same principles of subsidiarity emerging on the ground. The argument of this paper applies to the national policy audience across the UK, calling for national governments to check their role in preventing overreach, just as local public sector institutions and practitioners must. There is an essential micro/macro interplay between local and national institutions, offering a significant opportunity for national institutions to actively support a genuine shift toward subsidiarity. National governments can mishandle this if they seek to unilaterally mandate rather than create an enabling framework. For example, the Localism Act 2011 created community rights in England, but was weak and set unrealistic expectations for local governments.¹² Given the current structural reforms afoot in England under the devolution agenda and Local Government Reform, it is an ideal time to advocate for how a new institutional settlement can create a framework for community-centred public services and the expectation that institutions work as better guests.

Asset-based community development

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) provides a lens that helps clarify the roles of communities (citizens and their associations) and the institutions that serve them.¹³ Viewed through this lens, there are functions that communities are uniquely qualified to perform, for which no satisfactory institutional proxy exists. Additionally, there are functions that governmental and allied institutions are best positioned to undertake, and we should not expect communities to assume these responsibilities. No one wants an unqualified neighbour to operate on their sick child or parent, regardless of how much social capital they possess. Between these unique community and institutional capabilities, there are also areas of overlap where institutional supports can act as extensions, protections, and animators of community power.

Table 1 contrasts deficit-based, institutionally centric approaches to public service with asset-based, community-centred approaches.

¹² Wargent, M. (2017). *Democratic participation and agonism: citizen perspectives of participatory spaces created under the Localism Act (2011)*. (PhD thesis). University of Sheffield.

¹³ McKnight, J., & Russell, C. (2022). Asset-Based Community Development. In L. Rapp-McCal I, A. Roberts, & K. Corcoran (Eds.), *Social Workers Desk Reference* (4th ed.): Oxford University Press.

Table 1: Contrasting deficit-based approaches and asset-based community development approach

Deficit-based institutionally centric response	Asset-based community-centred response
Focus on community deficiencies	Focus on community resources
Problem response / technical solutions	Opportunity orientation / community/lived experience informed approach.
Needs are identified externally, support is “one-size fits all”	Appropriate supports are agreed through collaborative dialogue. We can't fully know what a community needs until we know what it has.
External experts provide solutions in one-way transactions; compliance with rules/directives is the central goal.	Citizens and their associations are recognised for their unique contributions; supplemented by agency-enhancing expertise and resources when required.
Grant criteria are determined and assessed by outside actors	Outside institutions recognise communities know what's needed; and that knowledge deepens and coheres with technical assistance and community animation. Donors are “on-tap, not on-top”.
Supports are determined by outside actors through top-down standardised needs assessments	Communities determine the supports they need, including support for the most marginalised; services provide supplementary support.
Communities are categorised by level and type of need and organised into labelled groups: such as youth at risk, frail older people, ex-prisoners, people with disabilities	Barriers to participation are removed. Community development approaches are used to build solidarity between various interest and affinity groups.

Micro and macro approaches

In my work across the UK, I have enjoyed seeing public sector leaders and practitioners adopt community-first approaches. I am continually impressed by the inventiveness that practitioners and policymakers bring to serve the communities they work alongside. Communities often initially notice community-first approaches through the actions of public servants and voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise (VCFSE) practitioners working in their neighbourhoods. These practitioners operate at the micro level, building trust with the communities daily; some may also be residents of the very communities in which they work. They are “alongsiders”, meaning they walk alongside communities, enabling them to discover, connect, and mobilise their assets.¹⁴

Institutions adopting a community-first approach do not just operate at a micro level; they also serve communities at a macro level. While not all public servants are close enough to act as alongsiders, they can, and many do, engage in the art of being a “useful outsider.” Public services at the macro scale serve communities in many essential ways, from strength-based commissioning to strategies that decentralise public services to work in more responsive, place-based ways.

I have more examples of micro and macro community-first approaches to public services than I have the scope to share in this paper. They all deserve to be spotlighted. In this think piece, I seek to make a modest contribution to that vital work by highlighting Leeds City Council’s community-first efforts.

¹⁴ Russell, C. (2020). *Rekindling Democracy: A Professional’s Guide to Working in Citizen Space*: Cascade Books.

2: Shifting from institutionally centric to community-centred policies and practices

Part 2 of this paper details the community-first approach that Leeds City Council initially adopted for Adult Social Care and now for many other public services across the city. Here, I offer a commentary on their promising practice to demystify the approach for other interested wayfinders in the UK.

Leeds City Council's ABCD approach to adult social care (a case study)

Leeds ABCD journey (2013 to date) at a glance:

- ▬ **2013/15:** Leeds City Council's Adults and Health directorate trials the ABCD framework in three Neighbourhood Networks in Leeds. This involved employing new community builders and training existing professionals as community builders, identifying connectors, providing "small sparks" funding, and developing asset maps in three neighbourhoods.
- ▬ **2017:** Building on the success of the trials, three new "ABCD pathfinders" were established and funded by Leeds City Council (LCC), Adults and Health directorate.
- ▬ **2019:** Based on evidence from the successful pathfinders, further funding, including a contribution from NHS partners, allowed for the establishment of eight more ABCD pathfinders in neighbourhoods across the city.
- ▬ **Present:** ABCD sites continue to flourish in Leeds. There are now 17 across the city.
- ▬ Leeds City Council Adults and Health is working with a wide variety of partners in the public and third sectors of the city to integrate asset-based community-first approaches into their work.
- ▬ Other directorates within Leeds City Council, such as Culture and Libraries, adopt asset-based community-first approaches.
- ▬ Children's Services and schools in Leeds are exploring asset-based approaches to improve children's attainment.

- NHS organisations seek to apply asset-based community-first approaches within community healthcare services, and GP practices within Local Care Partnerships are increasingly supportive.
- Efforts are underway to support the recognition of everyone, including those with care and support needs, as valuable community members.
- Funding for ABCD is prioritised within Adults and Health, although it is relatively small compared to core service funding and the number of neighbourhoods across the city.
- There is ongoing reflection and learning about the challenges and cultural shift required to fully embrace asset-based community-first approaches across all sectors. LCC employs a dedicated coordinator of Asset-Based Community Development, and citywide training is continuously rolling out across the city.

Ongoing Implementation of ABCD in Leeds (present/future): A strategy is in place to continue focusing on four layers of ABCD implementation:

1. Funding community builders/animators
2. Small Sparks Funding
3. Encouraging existing organisations to adopt asset-based community-first practices, and
4. Inviting larger organisations or other directorates in the city to support community-led neighbourhood responses to various socio-economic challenges.

Robin's story: from needy to needed

As a practical example, here is the story of a gentleman named Robin whose life changed for the better due to the community-first approach to social care in Leeds. Robin was in his mid-70s when he first came into contact with an ABCD community builder¹⁵ in his neighbourhood. His wife had recently died, and he was grieving and very socially isolated. The community builder got alongside Robin and, as well as demonstrating empathy, she also asked him what his passions

¹⁵ Note: "community animators" and "community builders" are interchangeable terms.

were, what he cared about enough to act upon, and what made his “eyes dance in his head.” Robin was initially surprised when she asked those questions; no other professional seemed interested in anything other than his sadness. Once he overcame the initial shock, he told her he was passionate about making walking sticks. This involved him taking branches from fallen trees and carving them into walking sticks. Ironically, given this thinkpiece's theme, Robin worked for the LCC Parks Department before he retired.

From there, the community builder worked to build trust between them, and as Robin's confidence grew, she began to link Robin, based on his interest in wood carving, with neighbours who shared his interest. Today, Robin leads a group he formed, composed of individuals from all age groups who are learning how to make walking sticks, among other things, and sharing them within their community.

It cost the council circa £30k per annum in salary and programme costs to have a community builder in Robin's neighbourhood. In contrast, a full-time residential care placement costs LCC circa £53,000 annually.¹⁶ It is not always possible to prove a clear causal link between the reduction in demand for institutionalised care in every such case. Yet the best hope of ethically reducing institutionalisation is increasing communalisation. Due to LCC's community-centred approach to social care, Robin is not primarily defined as a client in a service system; he is a citizen at the centre of his community, utilising his gifts alongside his neighbours to create a more inclusive community.

Beyond social return on investment

An independent evaluation led by Professor Jane South and her colleagues at Leeds Beckett University attests to the profound impact of employing ABCD community builders/animators in neighbourhoods in Leeds.¹⁷ Their findings illustrate a remarkable strengthening of community ties, with residents becoming better connected and actively working towards the changes they care about. The evaluation further reveals a staggering social value return of between £5.27 and £14.02 for every £1 invested—a testament to the efficacy of this approach. While Social Return on Investment (SROI) can help make the business case for such ways of working, it does not adequately convey the transformational and

¹⁶ NHS England (2024). Adult Social Care Activity and Finance Report, England, 2023–24. Retrieved from: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/adult-social-care-activity-and-finance-report/2023-24>.

¹⁷ See South, J., Woodward, J., Coan, S., Bagnall, A.-M., & Rippon, S. (2021). *Asset-Based Community Development: Evaluation of Leeds ABCD*. Leeds. Retrieved from: <https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7640/>

pervasive value of shifting culture and public narrative¹⁸ towards a community-first paradigm. The hidden danger in relying solely on SROI to advance the case for ABCD/community-first approaches is that we assume the secret sauce is in the programme or the model, not the culture shift from institution-centric to community-centred. So, we bolt ABCD onto all the other services and then proceed with business as usual.

In the following section, therefore, using Leeds ABCD journey as inspiration, I offer a commentary on how public services can precipitate this culture shift. Specifically, I argue for three key shifts:

1. **From predominantly issue-based to more place-based responses**, whereby the neighbourhood is seen as the primary unit of change.
2. **From institution-first to community-first.** This involves realignment between the public sector and communities, which at the macro level casts public sector institutions as useful outsiders and at the micro level as alongsiders.
3. **From only public services having a monopoly** on the functions and resources for solving societal problems, to public services being allies in co-producing solutions alongside communities, commercial institutions, and civil society. Here, **communities also have functions and capabilities essential to sustainable development and growth.**

¹⁸ Ganz, M. (2011). Public narrative, collective action, and power. In S. Odugbemi & T. Lee (Eds.), *Accountability through public opinion: From inertia to Public Action*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank

Analysis: The neighbourhood as the primary unit of change¹⁹

When elected members, directors, and senior commissioners for adult social care and health-related portfolios in Leeds shifted from seeing the primary unit of change as issue-based to place-based, it enabled them to prioritise connectivity over siloed approaches and, paradoxically, to take a more impactful and holistic approach to the issues pertaining to social care and health. As external institutional practitioners, LCC assumed the role of guests or "useful outsiders" (see below). They approached communities humbly, aiming to understand and enhance local power rather than impose solutions. Hence, they started with local, rooted partners like the Neighbourhood Networks. They also clearly articulated their exit strategy with local communities from the outset.

Their ongoing effectiveness hinges on recognising grassroots initiatives and supporting their growth and local ownership, while being mindful of how, as an external institution, their interventions can easily displace local structures and autonomy. Balancing support and preserving community power requires respect for local knowledge and sovereignty and understanding each local community's context, since each neighbourhood has unique characteristics and assets. The technical term for this form of alignment is subsidiarity, where no larger entity or institution engages in overreach or expropriation of functions that can be undertaken by smaller, more localised entities, institutions, or associations. LCC's ABCD approach is an elegant example of subsidiarity in practice.

In any public sector body, there is an ongoing dilemma around coordinating micro and macro priorities, akin to hand-eye coordination for many human beings. For the remainder of this section, therefore, I will turn to how LCC coordinated the more strategic and administrative dimensions of adult social care (macro) with the day-to-day operational side of its work (micro), and how the macro and the micro dimensions aligned with each other and the principles of ABCD. In closing this part of the paper, I'll comment on the importance of understanding that communities are not passive; they perform irreplaceable functions.

¹⁹ See Russell, C., & McKnight, J. (2022). *The connected community: Discovering the health, wealth, and power of neighborhoods*: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

The useful outsiders (macro)

Useful outsiders in LCC played a vital role in fostering community-first policies.²⁰ At the macro levels of the organisation, ranging from elected members, department directors, service heads, and procurement officers, LCC public servants discovered legitimate ways to align their institutions' assets with the assets and priorities of communities and equity-seeking individuals and groups. Here is how they do so:

- ▬ They **prioritise community agency** while recognising structural injustices and understanding that genuine solutions require local insights rather than external impositions.

- ▬ Another hallmark of their approach is **cheering on community-driven alternatives**. Whether a doctor highlighting local health resources or a police officer advocating for neighbourhood connections, useful outsiders illuminate the untapped potential within communities.

- ▬ **Transparency is key**; they communicate openly about their limitations, ensuring they do not overstep into areas where residents and locally rooted community organisations can manage themselves. By affirming local capabilities, they resource communities to address issues like loneliness with self-driven solutions rather than relying solely on formal programmes lacking community ownership.

- ▬ Their mission extends beyond reforming their institutions; it is about renewing associational life that enriches community ties and power and putting themselves and their organisations in service of this higher goal. They recognise that many socio-economic challenges necessitate collective action, focusing on energising the social fabric of communities rather than merely enhancing bureaucratic processes within their institutions.

- ▬ **Courage is a defining trait** of everyone involved in community-first efforts, as they often advocate for community interests that may conflict with their institutional mandates. This dual allegiance demands compassion, assertiveness, and strategic navigation of power dynamics, allowing them to champion local priorities while managing employer expectations. It also means they are willing to address structural inequities and collectively with communities and marginalised peoples to remove barriers to inclusion and participation.

²⁰ See Russell, C., & McKnight, J. (2022). *The connected community: Discovering the health, wealth, and power of neighborhoods*. In (pp 138-139): Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Alongsiders (micro)

Alongsiders are community workers. Some work directly for LCC, and local neighbourhood-based organisations host others. They engage in the day-to-day micro community animation work. Many public services that do not work in a community-first way do not have a relationship with communities; instead, they relate to “clients” or “customers” who meet their criteria for service provision.

On one street, in one neighbourhood, in another city in the UK that I am working with, there was a school, a luncheon club for older people, and a youth project operating in complete isolation. This is one of the unintended side effects of siloed approaches to funding and service provision, evident in most communities across the UK. Through the work of community animators and shifts in the practices of other professionals working in that neighbourhood, these groups are now working with each other to work on shared concerns and figure out what they can do together that they cannot do alone.

In another community in Wales, a local rugby club discovered that many older people on an estate near their club were afraid to go out after dark. Club members spoke with their older neighbours and hatched a plan to run tag rugby practice evenings in the estate. Older people come out to cheer on the young players, and after practice, the club accompanies their older neighbours to various places and activities such as bingo or the local shops. This is a reciprocal exchange; the young players get as much from their older neighbours through mentorship as they give. In this way, older people receive support that makes them feel they matter. All involved are both valued and adding value. It was a community animator who facilitated those connections. The senior commissioner for adult services commented that in the absence of this alongsidership, some older neighbours would have been placed in congregated care settings.

It is deeply relational work that transcends fixing or advising; it is a profound act of respect for the autonomy and sovereignty of the citizens and associations they serve, viewing them as makers, doers, and creators, not just consumers of ameliorative services. When done well, it engenders trust in the institutions that

employ or fund the alongsiders and builds confidence across communities, believing they, too, have power and that public services “have their back”. That is why in Leeds, having community animators at the neighbourhood level has ultimately led to better service provision. External public services can only truly understand what a community needs when they appreciate what a community has.

For greater alignment between the macro and the micro aspects of public services to occur, as well as useful outsiders, society needs more alongsiders able to work in hyperlocal ways that recognise and support these relational aspects and how they interact with the creativity of communities, rather than impose constraints that can be associated with a service delivery mindset.

Communities Have Functions Too

A pivotal strategic shift for adult social care and health in Leeds occurred when they recognised that many of the seven community functions listed below were not the sole purview of local institutions. Realising that citizens, especially people with lived experience, and their associations play a fundamental role in achieving many of the outcomes across these seven functions,²¹ it was concluded that, besides providing services to individuals and groups, public services also must foster community cohesion, neighbourhood belonging, and community power.

Seven Community Functions

1. Health and well-being creation.
2. Custodianship of local safety.
3. Stewardship for local ecologies and biospheres
4. Nutritious, in-season, affordable food production and distribution.
5. Local economic development.
6. Raising children and young people.
7. Ageing well in place/locale and caring for marginalised community members.

When these civic functions are consistently performed, individuals and communities grow their community power, akin to civic muscle. Strengthening

²¹ See Russell, C., & McKnight, J. (2022). *The connected community: Discovering the health, wealth, and power of neighborhoods*. In (pp 85-100) : Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

the local democratic system requires consistent flexing and movement. These functions allow citizens to exercise their civic authority, significantly impacting overall population health by addressing health disparities and promoting health from a non-biomedical perspective. Citizenship thus extends beyond voting or sporadic participation in institutionally defined activities; residents co-create and actively engage in the seven functions by choice, producing significant socio-economic and structural impacts both locally and beyond. Acknowledging the ongoing value of services and money, especially in social care, is essential. The substantive point is that services and funds, when delivered at the right time, in the right place, and for the right reasons, as a back-up to natural solutions, are invaluable. Still, without the community development work described above, it can be nearly impossible to strike that balance.

Recommendations

Leeds City Council, while what they are doing is wonderful, it is not unusual. What they are doing can be done in almost any public service. Similar work is happening in Bristol,²² Plymouth,²³ and East Ayrshire.²⁴ In Wales, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Services have adopted a community-centred approach to their probation work through their Grand Avenues²⁵ initiative. Hywel Dda University Health Board is infusing a social model in their population health and health inequalities work in West Wales.²⁶ York City Council has successfully applied a family and community-first approach to their Children's Service.²⁷

Here are some recommendations on how public services can build on this promising movement to deepen community-first practices. These are not intended to be conclusive or prescriptive. I offer them as a cross-section of my learnings from being alongside many community-oriented public servants and as conversation starters.

1. **Offer solidarity and advocacy:** Public services can support local community and economic development by advocating for inclusive causes that resonate with community members. Standing in solidarity with local communities is a sure way to build trust and mutual alliance.
2. **Use your convening power:** Many senior public servants have significant convening power that can be utilised to enable communities to engage in dialogue about complex or divisive issues. For example, a senior prison warden could convene residents from neighbourhoods with the highest number of individuals in the prison system, inviting them to explore community alternatives to incarceration.
3. **Share economic power:** Public services can enhance local economies and economic well-being. From public-private partnerships to neighbourhood match funding initiatives, public services can enable

²² See <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/residents/people-and-communities/get-involved-in-your-community#:~:text=We%20regularly%20run%20a%20one,care%20about%20where%20you%20live> to learn more about how Bristol City Council and partners are using ABCD to support community-led action in neighbourhoods.

²³ See, for example, the Community Builders Programme working in Devon NHS Wellbeing Hubs: <https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/community-builders>

²⁴ See East Ayrshire Council and East Ayrshire Communities Partnership "COMMUNITY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2024-2027": <https://www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk/Resources/PDF/E/East-Ayrshire-Community-Learning-and-Development-Plan-2024-to-2027.pdf>

²⁵ See <https://svp.org.uk/case-studies/cardiffs-grand-avenues-project> for a glimpse into this strength-based community-centred approach to probation in two neighbourhoods with the highest rates of recidivism in Wales.

²⁶ See <https://hduhb.nhs.wales/healthcare/services-and-teams/social-model-for-health-and-wellbeing/> for a description of Hywel Dda University Health Board's Social Model for Health and Well-being.

²⁷ See Ofsted Inspection of City of York Council local authority children's services. Inspection dates: 24 February 2025 to 7 March 2025 <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50274368> for a detailed account of the City of York's remarkable journey in children's services over the last two years. Their current approach is strengths-based and family and community-centred and is profoundly impactful.

communities without sufficient fiscal capital, collateral, or standing with lenders to move forward. Establishing more equitable funding arrangements, access to affordable cooperative models of credit, and promoting a community-first approach to funding, such as the Neighbourhood Matching Fund Scheme in Seattle, would mitigate power imbalances. There is also scope to shift more systematically towards pooled, place-based budgets across public services to better incentivise and enable community-centred (as opposed to institutionally led) public service responses²⁸.

4. **Share personnel skills:** Many public servants have essential skills and talents they may want to share with communities. Creating a database of skills that staff members could harness to benefit communities, while simultaneously enabling communities to tap into those assets, would result in more micro-trusting encounters between institutions and citizens and enhance staff morale.
5. **Share space:** Public services can provide (low-cost/no-cost) facilities to local groups, thereby fostering goodwill and social cohesion and creating passive, unscripted opportunities to build reciprocal relationships between professionals and citizens.
6. **Relocate authority to community alternatives:** Public services can do more to recognise community competencies in mutual care by offering more support for initiatives like Shared Lives. Other examples of community-centred care can be seen in prison recovery wings, where inmates are trusted to self-organise and manage portions of their daily programmes.
7. **Host a community animator:** Employing a Community Animator, repurposing an existing role to assume community animating functions, or providing capital resources to an embedded intermediary to host a Community Animator can significantly enhance the discovery, connection, and mobilisation of local assets, thereby fostering community cohesion, neighbourhood belonging and community power.
8. **Decentralise:** When faced with economic challenges, public services typically centralise their services to reduce costs. In contrast, community-oriented thinking advocates for maximum decentralisation, by locating as many staff and services as possible in local neighbourhoods to increase

²⁸ See for further discussion, Denham, J., & Studdert, J (2024). *Place-based public service budgets: Making money work better for communities*: New Local <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/research-reports/place-based-budgets/>

proximity and trust. This embeds staff in economically challenged communities and helps to foster an all-hands-on-deck attitude to community and economic renewal.

9. Support self-managed neighbourhood teams:

The Buurtzorg model²⁹ is a prime evidence-informed example of the effectiveness of self-managed neighbourhood teams, but it is not the only one. This structure of localising self-managed teams has numerous advantages, especially when it comes to primary care. Chief among them is its ability to create optimal alignment in terms of scope, scale, and speed between associations, professionals, and institutions.

10. Establish department of neighbourhoods/vibrant communities teams:

Seattle City Government was among the first in the United States to establish a Department of Neighbourhoods. Organising a department dedicated to serving communities provides a structural foundation for the policies and practices advocated in this paper. In the UK context, there are some very effective alternatives to a complete restructure, with the Vibrant Communities approach in East Ayrshire, Scotland, being the most noteworthy.³⁰

11. Facilitate asset-based workforce development:

To proliferate community animation practices and the policies that engender them across public services, it is vital to provide civil servants with appropriate continued professional development opportunities. Such CPD supports should be augmented by ongoing monthly reflective practice, appropriate peer-mentoring sessions, and mentoring sessions with community members and people with lived experience, who should receive appropriate training and remuneration.

12. Use developmental approaches to evaluation:

In evaluating community-first practices, the focus should be on how change happens in complex, self-organising adaptive environments, not if change has occurred. Good evaluation involves learning and insight, not auditing and widget counting. It is also important that institutions that outwardly evaluate community initiatives should also turn the looking glass back on themselves and constantly evaluate their own policies and practices.

²⁹ Buurtzorg is a pioneering healthcare organisation established in 2006. Its nurse-led holistic care model revolutionised community care in the Netherlands. <https://www.buurtzorg.com/>

³⁰ Further information about this initiative and the inspiring leadership of Katie Kelly, who played a pivotal role in bringing the initiative to life, can be found here: <https://www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk/CouncilAndGovernment/About-the-Council/East-Ayrshire-Council-Structure/Safer-Communities/HousingandCommunities/VibrantCommunities.aspx>

Conclusion

The creativity and contributions of citizens and their associations are irreplaceable in a democracy; they give democracy its meaning. There are no sustainable institutional or technological proxies for community power. A democracy without citizens forming associations is, therefore, nonsensical. Equally, for a public sector to legitimately operate within a democracy, it must prioritise citizens and associations before its institutional interests, hence the term public service.

Here, I have argued that revitalising associational life in neighbourhoods is a net good for those communities and civil society in general. This would serve to renew public services in numerous ways. First, a new community-first settlement that realigns the relationship between institutions and communities reduces burnout. Since public servants would no longer be expected to assume a monopoly on problem-solving, change would be done with communities and by communities. Second, public trust in institutions would improve because people trust professionals who recognise their agency, autonomy, and the value of their lived experience and social networks. Third, more integrated solutions would emerge because there is a greater opportunity for meaningful long-term collaboration when institutions and associations operate with a common focus on local places rather than siloed, deficit-based, single issues. Fourthly, change-making efforts would be more sustainable because the collective efficacy of local communities would be core to all future development.

An institution-centric approach to any socio-economic or ecological challenge inevitably reduces citizens and their associations to the subordinate status of clients of state-funded services. At home, at play, and at work, we are so much more than the sum of our problems. A community-first approach, in contrast, offers promise not just to communities and the public sector, but to everyone in the UK, because it affirms:

- Rights and opportunities of citizenship – including the right to be valued and to add value to others.
- Rights and opportunities to associational life that is plural, confident, and welcomes the “stranger” at the margins.
- Rights to have formal services as a backup to associational supports.

Getting there starts with changing practice towards a process of deep listening and learning to discover what people care about enough to act upon in a communitarian way. At the macro and micro levels of public services, public servants can rekindle democracy³¹ by deepening their facilitative practice as useful outsiders, alongsiders, and community animators, moving to follow the lead of citizens and communities wherever possible, as well as listening deeply to their colleagues as civic professionals and not just service providers. Where the constraints within their institution are too significant, they can collaborate with smaller organisations, rooted in local neighbourhoods, or work with marginalised groups that act like embedded intermediaries between large institutions and communities.

In times of adversity and prosperity, it is crucial to recognise that every public servant in the UK is a citizen, and every citizen, through their participation, however modest, in the public square, is performing an invaluable service. Through these myriad relational encounters, we can use what we have, including expertise and professionalism, to secure what we need in fair and inclusive ways. The grand purpose of community and institutional power intersects at the junction of civic and ecological renewal and community and economic well-being. Since there can be no well-being without equity and equality^{32, 33} community well-being is a shared concern for all citizens and civic professionals³⁴. It is the foundation on which trust is built, enabling the pillars of society, ecology, and economy to coexist and thrive.

In a liberal democracy, realising its full promise, citizens can reasonably hope to have their bread buttered on both sides if they accept that there are two tools for such a job: associational and institutional. A preferred future, therefore, is not contingent solely on better services but on better alignment between associations and institutions. In this communitarian adventure, everyone's contribution matters.³⁵

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³¹ See Russell, C. (2020). *Rekindling Democracy. A Professional's Guide to Working in Citizen Space*: Cascade Books.

³² See Popay, J., Whitehead, M., Ponsford, R., Egan, M., & Mead, R. (2021). Power, control, communities and health inequalities I: theories, concepts and analytical frameworks. *Health Promotion International*, 36(5), 1253-1263. doi:10.1093/heapro/daaa133

³³ See Marmot, M. (2010). *Fair society, healthy lives. Strategic review of health inequalities in England post-2010*. <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-exec-summary-pdf.pdf>

³⁴ See Prilleltensky, I. (2012). Wellness as fairness. *Am J Community Psychol*, 49(1-2), 1-21. doi:10.1007/s10464-011-9448-8

³⁵ Wittmayer, J. M., van Steenberg, F., Loorbach, D., Mock, M., & Omann, I. (2014). Exploring the transformative potential of communities. *Sustainable Consumption Transitions Series Issue 3*, 2014.

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