



Hartpury Active Essex Systems Evaluation: ABCD Findings Report - January 2023

DR KEVIN HARRIS, DR ALEX KAY, LOUIS RYAN, CLAIRE HANNAH-RUSSELL AND TRAVIS FISHER.

Phase 2 Programme theory testing

- Having carried out the comprehensive collaborative process from phase 1, this phase consisted of the evaluation testing the wide range of explanatory assumptions and beliefs underpinning the areas of focus.
- Here, we utilised a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods to test these assumptions and beliefs, and then offer insights and reflections for refinement to inform overall learning to action.
- These methods were tested with a wide range of stakeholders in the active Essex system ranging from beneficiaries to senior decision makers and influencers.
- This phase was also supported by the embedded SROI approach.
- It is important to state that during this testing phase we were conscious of existing evaluation work and data collection taking place across Active Essex. As a result, we made every effort to collaborate and avoid duplication (for example supporting and working with the LDP realist evaluation framework in progress).

Over the course of the evaluation, we implemented a range of qualitative and quantitative methods to facilitate the deep dive process. These are outlined below.

21 -Interviews

Semi-structured interviews captured the impact and illustrated which changes were observable across the four areas of focus. We explored how and why engagement across the four areas of focus contributed to change in individuals, communities, and the system.

53 -Surveys

Surveys were co produced as a mixed method to gather quantitative and qualitative data across the four areas of focus from participants and strategic stakeholders. These informed the programme theory testing, deep dives and the social return on investment forecast. The four ONS Wellby questions were built into each survey.

The background features a stylized illustration of several hands in various colors (red, teal, yellow, blue, pink, green) reaching upwards. Each hand has a white heart outline on its palm. Above the hands are several solid-colored hearts in red, yellow, pink, and green. The entire scene is set against a white background with faint, concentric dashed circles and thin grey lines.

ABCD findings

Initial assumption

Cultural intermediaries in Essex form connections with fellow residents to drive physical activity with the support of community builders

Those involved in ABCD implementation are able to bring together communities and organisations to address challenges in the area through physical activity

Training for Active Essex staff and wider stakeholders is a key resource to facilitate place based ways of working

Physical activity programmes that are owned locally by local people take an inside out strengths based approach that gives autonomy back to the community.

How is this playing out?

Cultural intermediaries are in force throughout Essex facilitating opportunities for physical activity through the support of funding and ABCD catalysts.

This is true as sessions are led by place based working staff and volunteers who are trained or have experienced challenges that others are experiencing. Participants engage and take part because of the ABCD leaders who are known and mirror the ABCD leaders

Survey respondents drew favourably upon nurture development training that helped and facilitates place based ways of working. In many cases staff occupy these values but the training facilitates the process in a positive way by taking inside out approaches.

By giving autonomy and control back to the community over physical activity communities build upon their strengths and cultivate physical activity provision. Staff who are trained to facilitate and embody this approach are crucial for this to happen.

ABCD Impact headlines

Going Deeper into findings – ABCD

What we Explored:

Those involved in ABCD implementation within their communities have support to connect with others in the area and organisations and act on things they may want to address. The outcome of this may be that the community becomes more united and involved in the process of creating change. This may prove to improve resilience and connection in communities as their capacity and abilities strengthen and align.

What we found:

Active Essex work with cultural intermediaries and community groups who are placed within communities to try to embed ABCD practices within physical activity provision. This approach embodies the belief that cultural intermediaries and community groups are best placed to understand the issues in their respective communities and then tackle them through a strengths-based approach to the assets in the community. Joan (LTO lead) has the belief that ***"we should be looking at the resources we have got before we start knocking things down or rebuilding things when there are assets we can use"***. Joan delivers projects that focus on ***"helping people move from A to B and helping them with the tools they need to get there"***. Physical activity is not the primary focus of the projects but there is the understanding how physical activity such as a wellbeing walk, can be an opportunity to help them access further opportunities through staff and volunteer encouragement.

The opportunity to bring communities together is true where sessions are led by place based working staff and volunteers. These staff have a desire to give back with Carol (funding recipient) stating the reasons she runs community projects is because ***"I suffered through the same problems as others [in this community] and I want to help them have a better experience"***. Participants engage and take part because of the ABCD leaders as they align with the staff/volunteers values when it comes to community engagement. This is seen with many of the LTO's engaging with Active Essex where there is an emphasis on meeting people where they are on their physical activity journey, recognising that they may need support to overcome barriers before they are able to be physically active.

There is also lots of signposting from AE and LTO's to other ways they can be supported. AE and LTO's would benefit from a formal referral process to identify who has been able to access further opportunities/support to understand how they are supporting individuals/families to further benefit because of their involvement.

Going Deeper into findings – ABCD

What we Explored:

Those cultural intermediaries driving ABCD physical activity approaches in their community form connections with fellow residents and resources within the community, often with the support of the designated community builder or ABCD catalyst who can convey the interests of the community. This may allow and support an emergence of untapped skills, talents and resources that the community may not have been aware of and allow collaboration with assets to establish new groups and activities within a community.

What we found:

AE has been able to support cultural intermediaries to facilitate provision of physical activity where participants feel these activities are delivered in local places, spaces and amenities (97%). Active Essex Staff who are trained to facilitate and embody this approach are crucial for this to happen as they are ABCD catalysts that maintain the relationship between Active Essex and cultural intermediaries. These ABCD catalysts are **"approachable"** (Peter, LTO member) and **"are easy to pick up the phone and talk to"** (Skylar, funding recipient) which encourages the cultural intermediaries being worked with to reach out when they need support.

The cultural intermediaries identified to work with are individuals and organisations that embody the ABCD principles they wish to utilise, where they already have a relationship with community members. This understanding is that this provides an insight into the community assets that can be used to provide physical activity opportunities that is suitable and accessible for community members. The Local Delivery Pilot has contributed to building up these relationships through Local Authorities and some pre-existing relationships with communities.

Cultural intermediaries are known members of the community and are either encouraged to apply for funding by ABCD catalysts or are seeking funding to continue or start provision of physical activity opportunities in their community. They have built up their relationship with community members over longer periods of time, whether the cultural intermediary is an organisation that is trusted by communities, or individuals who are trusted by communities.

Cultural intermediaries are already within the community delivering projects that are aimed at supporting and helping the community to overcome challenges they are facing. They provide more than just physical activity to their community, focusing on the assets (buildings, blue and green spaces, qualified/experienced individuals) in their community to provide access to cooking classes, community fridges (food banks), and opportunities to socialise with others, through organised walks, coffee mornings, and community events.

Going Deeper into findings – ABCD

What we Explored:

Eventually, the funding for the interventions within communities may cease, and the communities will need to be self-sufficient. By giving the responsibility and control of the physical activity to those in the community and educating key stakeholders on the ground within the community system on making the most of their resources, there is potential for physical activity sustainability within an ABCD approach.

What we found:

For many there is a worry about sustaining their project delivery through reliance on core funding, should the funding stop. It is felt there was potential for ABCD deliverers to be supported in how to advertise their project or to set up a website to make their project sustainable by increasing participation, building on the perceived weaknesses of the ABCD deliverers. For Skylar (Funding recipient) she felt **"community builders might not have the skills"** necessary to sustain a project without core funding. Skylar would like more support in business management and admin management because **"if they want me to be sustainable, I need support, chucking money at me doesn't help"**. Jane (funding recipient) was provided with funding that allowed her to cover costs of training, licensing and insurance however there was a fear that the communities she is targeting don't have the money to sustain her provision. **"Without knowing about the funding pot, I wouldn't have been able to run the project and the children wouldn't have been able to take part"**.

Skylar does feel supported to deliver an ABCD approach where staff she speaks to feel like **"normal people [without the]bureaucracy"** that may limit community led projects that rely on external funding. **"Active Essex have listened to my ideas about creativity, that [physical activity] doesn't have to be about tracksuits, it can be about music"**. Jane also felt supported to collaborate with other community leaders to wider provision across the locality however this was in the early days of planning.

What do these findings mean and where do we take them for refinement?

Identifying and having "access" to cultural intermediaries is vital in understanding the assets in the community that can be utilised for physical activity provision that is suitable for the needs of the community. Through developing and maintaining positive relationships that emphasise the mutual benefits between AE (or LDP areas), there is capacity to build upon current assets to encourage active citizenship.

ABCD Catalysts are vital staff that maintain and grow relationships with cultural intermediaries. They are the connection between AE and cultural intermediaries, vital to positioning an ABCD, place-based approach to physical activity in respective localities. Training that supports capacity building in ABCD is important to help facilitate an 'inside out' approach to community development.

ABCD is at the fulcrum of increasing physical activity amongst Essex residents. There is a clear understanding and joint thinking amongst LTO's working with AE to deliver PA. Working with these LTO's is deliberate in how they already demonstrated a community development-based approach to providing physical activity opportunities, allowing AE to place ABCD at the centre of their Essex wide approach.

Participants in community led physical activity share values with the cultural intermediary or the coach/leader/instructor. Having a common ground, informal relationship and shared connection with place is key. This should be continually cultivated.



Further supporting evidence for ABCD

Community residents agreed that:

- 69% developed skills and abilities relating to their ABCD activities
- 76% made use of local places, spaces and amenities
- 62% connected with other local organisations for support (information and resources)
- 69% contributed to positive change in their communities and felt more resilient
- 72% built relationships, trust and were more connected to others
- 66% were building in sustainability to their approach
- 69% disseminated their work with others
- 97% felt an increased sense of ownership and responsibility within their communities

Stakeholders who attended the Nurture Development training agreed that:

- 80% the training content was relevant to people's roles
- 64% the content of the training met people's needs and expectations
- 80% the quality of the training materials and resources was high
- 92% people said that the training facilitator demonstrated relevant knowledge



Initial assumption

Active Essex is able to influence goals and beliefs of wider stakeholders around place based working

How is this playing out?

Place based working is the core of transformational change being led by Active Essex because AE leaders are able to diplomatically facilitate place based awareness. Positioning people in the right forums with their leadership and charisma.

ABCD ways of working can break down and resist pushback from more outside in approaches to physical activity.

Bringing wider stakeholders who traditionally are not always involved is facilitated through AE leadership. However AE is a small cog in the overall machine.

By giving responsibility to communities and educating key stakeholders about making the most of their resources there is potential for sustainable physical activity that does not rely on core funding.

Active Essex support wider organisations and locally trusted partners to embody this place based transformational approach. However, people are still reliant on core funding.

Creating new and improving existing relationships emphasising the importance of place based physical activity helps to break down traditional and technocratic approaches.

ABCD System headlines

Going Deeper into findings - ABCD

What we Explored:

With engagement from stakeholders within the complex system of the community, such as council members and members of the CCG (at the time of writing), there is an opportunity to both understand and adapt some of their core beliefs, values, and goals for their community. Additional services such as health and social care have started to notice the benefit of ABCD-driven physical activity in some communities, demonstrating a potential for success within this. Using this level of buy in, it may be possible to alter modes of thinking about community development and create a shift from deficit-based approaches to strengths-based approaches for supporting physical activity in Essex. By focusing on this, the communities can get creative and develop programmes based on the drive of the members of the public.

What we found:

Active Essex fund and support non-traditional providers of physical activity to encourage wider participation amongst inactive residents through supporting wider organisations that may not have been traditionally supported to delivery physical activity. These non-traditional methods have seen structural change where the approach to increasing physical activity is broader, working with community groups that have the potential to increase physical activity through their provision with gardening and litter picking two prominent examples of investment into projects that primarily see physical activity as a secondary outcome to socialisation, mental wellbeing and sense of community. Find Your Active is an example where non-traditional providers receive support to increase physical activity levels amongst inactive groups.

However, in practice this is challenging whereby **"The shift to ABCD is politically tricky"** (Francine, Senior System Stakeholder) as physical activity is not top of the agenda outside of the physical activity sector. System stakeholders wider than physical activity have **"other priorities to integrate into our work alongside ABCD"** (Francine). Whilst Active Essex has a voice in promoting an ABCD to integrating physical activity, it is a small bit of the work delivered across the system.

Active Essex leaders seek to develop relationships with wider stakeholders that may benefit from an ABCD approach, integrating physical activity into their strategies to reach their goals. Whilst there is this positioning of Active Essex having a voice within forums and panels across the system, it is in the foundational stages of potentially spreading across the system.

Going Deeper into findings - ABCD

What we Explored:

ABCD approaches could be seen to have some pushback with key stakeholders due to the desire to have control over programmes and activities within the area. This may be attributed to political motivations, such as elections and a desire for recognition. By educating or training these key stakeholders such as local officials and council members and giving them a deeper understanding of the benefits of ABCD, it may be possible to foster a sense of consciousness around the community itself being able to take more control of physical activity programmes in Essex.

What we found:

Active Essex's approach to physical activity via ABCD has allowed them to support new and innovative approaches to physical activity is supported by creating new relationships with LTO's that deliver community-based activity and improving existing relationships. Active Essex continues to positively influence and support partners and community groups (through funding and guidance) that already deliver physical activity opportunities and those who hold a belief in the potential of physical activity.

The mutual interest in seeking to improve community wellbeing and resilience when positioning ABCD amongst stakeholders is important when developing relationships across stakeholders. Active Essex leadership are involved in developing relationships with wider stakeholders (healthcare, county council) to emphasise the importance of physical activity across the system, but Active Essex remains a **"small cog in the overall machine"** (Megan, Senior System Stakeholder) which limits its influence in embedding this physical activity approach across the system.

Joe (Senior System Stakeholder) experiences pushback on an ABCD approach where **"people are not on the same page [regarding physical activity] so this is a process or a journey that we are still on"**. There is difficulty around political buy in where **"some politicians may struggle to let go as to who leads with physical activity and how to approach ensuring autonomy sits with community members"** (Francine). Roger (Senior System Stakeholder) has also seen challenge where **"there is difficulty in getting the politicians seeing the value"** of place based physical activity programmes.

What do these findings mean and where do we take them for refinement?

Active Essex promotes and leads ABCD with their LTO's as an embedded way of working as they share mutual interest in supporting communities through ABCD approaches to physical activity. This integration through ABCD provides an opportunity to grow this way of working into other sectors who are not always on board.

The positioning and participation of leaders in wider system forums to "push" place-based working is done with an understanding that there is a need for relationship building and bringing people into the journey (through leaders' charisma) but also the expertise and knowledge they have. Active Essex have used their resourcing and positioning well in starting to promote this movement of place-based working.

There is a shared belief amongst engaged stakeholders that funding community led provision will help to fulfil community outcomes. Community members are supported via an ABCD approach to access funding and support to deliver physical activity. In moving forward it is important to think about how 'inside out' approaches to community development may involve more communities on the ground in decision making, whilst taking ownership over the process.



Further Reading

These findings are part of an overall evaluation report. If you would like to see the overall report, please email kev.harris@hartpury.ac.uk for the Active Essex Systems Evaluation Report