



Co-producing a Community of Practice

Transforming wellbeing inequalities by building community assets

In this Policy Brief, we explain how we created a Community of Practice (CoP) and how it can be sustained. We show how the CoP's focus on a local community's wellbeing and building assets can transform inequalities in wellbeing by creating three fundamental shifts in practices.

What we wanted to find out

Social Prescribing is a growing health care innovation that addresses the wider determinants of health by connecting people to community-based activities and services. What we wanted to find out was:

Whether and how can Social Prescribing change inequalities in different communities' wellbeing?

Both the Centre for Urban Wellbeing at the University of Birmingham and The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS) believe that building communities' assets enables people to sustain and enhance their wellbeing. Using action research, we combined our asset-based approaches to stimulate mutual learning and immediate change by creating a Community of Practice (CoP).

We took a hyper-local approach to understand how individuals' experiences interact with the community's assets, focussing on Stechford in East Birmingham, where TAWS deliver a Social Prescribing programme.

The ward of Yardley West & Stechford includes diverse communities and a wealth of community assets. However, it is in the 10% most deprived in the UK. Compared to other wards in the city, the population has low levels of qualifications, higher levels of language barriers, high levels of child poverty and low levels of economic output. These factors all contribute to the wider social determinants of health and wellbeing.

During our 12-month project (in 2023/24), we convened a series of 4 workshops to build a Community of Practice around one Social Prescribing activity, the 'Walking Wednesdays' group. Engaging in this small group's weekly 'walk and talk' helped us to gain detailed insight into the wider community's assets and needs.



**When we meet, we discuss and we share,
and it gives you that connection**

Social Prescribing facilitator



I think partnering with organisations with shared interests is really important. You can't really do effective community engagement without it.

Earthwatch Researcher

How we co-produced a CoP

Community members, public and third sector organisations, and academic researchers co-created four main outputs through our workshops:

Rich pictures – community participants drew images to depict how green spaces contribute to their wellbeing and how various changes could enhance enjoyment of these assets.

Shared vision – We agreed we would like green space to be accessible (safe, clean and interesting), to achieve this collectively, and that this would create a shared sense of purpose, enhancing wellbeing in Stechford.

Action plan – we identified four strands of work to achieve the shared vision: activities, information sharing, communication channels, collaborative projects.

Strategy to pool resources – we identified how each of us could contribute to, benefit from and support each other in a CoP to continue to work together to deliver the action plan and shared vision.

What we recommend

Sustain the Community of Practice: Existing and new CoP members need to meet regularly to enable us to take action together for change.

Shared meeting coordination: CoP members can pool skills to facilitate engagement, learning and co-production in meetings and joint action.

Focus on community assets and needs:

The CoP needs to work closely with Social Prescribing programmes to sustain a shared focus on what matters locally.

Reciprocal benefit: Ensure that delivering the action plan and shared vision contributes to each participant's personal wellbeing and work priorities to justify the time and resource required to attend the CoP.

Mutual learning & joint action: Engage in three strands of action to create mutual benefits to CoP members and wider stakeholders:

Action	Benefits to participants
Activities & information-sharing <i>Share information with each other and disseminate to communities</i>	Increases participation Supports link workers; Connects resources; Builds existing assets.
Communication & co-production <i>Engage in design and delivery of each other's projects</i>	Enables co-design and delivery of activities; Pools diverse expertise of citizens and organisations; Includes diverse community groups.
Collaboration & pooled resources <i>Identify how multiple strategies contribute to the 'shared statement' and design joint projects</i>	Identifies strategies' contributions to each other and to community wellbeing; Aligns policies to create longer term plans; Builds capacity to achieve a joint aim.



I'm hopeful you'll find ways to use scarce funding by joining up and collaborating.

'Margaret', Walking Wednesdays member

What else needs to happen

Workshop participants identified further support needed which may lie outside the existing CoP membership:

■ **Manage power and relationships:**

In addition to coordination, support is also needed from a skilled community researcher to sustain trusting and empowered relationships in the CoP.

■ **Include more community participants:**

Draw on each other's expertise to develop a whole community approach to diversify referral routes into Social Prescribing activities and CoP meetings.

■ **Diversify participating organisations:**

CoP facilitators can connect to a wide range of community organisations through Birmingham Voluntary Sector Council.

■ **Create a constituted group:**

Approach Birmingham Community Matters to support the CoP to enable access to funding streams.

■ **Wider strategic enablers:**

Changes in the CoP's external environment will also facilitate change, such as NICE guidance to recommend timely referrals into social activities; the Council's willingness to shift from commissioning to co-production; links to strategic boards & neighbourhood plans.

How this can change inequalities

Workshop participants identified that co-producing action for change through a CoP could transform inequalities and build assets for wellbeing by creating three fundamental shifts in practice:



From competition to mutual understanding

- **The challenge:** a lack of information-sharing undermines community assets by creating competition, duplication and gaps.
- **Transformation:** CoP information-sharing directs resources to support existing assets.



From distrust to co-production

- **The challenge:** commissioning creates power imbalances and distrust between citizens, organisations and the City Council.
- **Transformation:** CoP communication that gives citizens more agency enables co-production and builds trust.



From funding constraints to pooled resources

- **The challenge:** funding criteria limit the capacity of single strategies to address wellbeing holistically.
- **Transformation:** the CoP focus on local assets and wellbeing creates the shared purpose that connects diverse strategic plans, motivating joint place-based projects that leverage resources from multiple strategic work programmes.

Questions for further research and learning

Sustaining the CoP raises further questions for research and joint learning:

Impact: Evaluate the CoP's relationships and outputs to assess power-sharing and impact.

Inequalities: Develop a context-specific framework to measure changes in community wellbeing.

Systems change: Analyse how interactions between the CoP and its governance environment advance an assets-based approach to wellbeing inequalities.

Resource shifts: Trace long-term shifts in resources from health-care to community assets.

Thank you to our participants

The following organisations and community groups took part in the workshops:

- Walking Wednesdays members
- The Active Wellbeing Society
- Streetscene & District Parks services, Birmingham City Council (BCC)
- Public Health teams (Adults, Communities, Children & Young People), BCC
- Birmingham Museums Trust
- City of Nature
- Earthwatch
- City-REDI community researcher
- Ecopark, Birmingham & Black Country Wildlife Trust
- Disability Resource Centre
- University of Birmingham

Suggested citation: Woodcock, E.M., Bartels, K.P.R., Wood, H., Gabriel, D., Pykett, J., Gilchrist, A. (2024) *'Co-producing a Community of Practice. Transforming wellbeing inequalities by building community assets.'* University of Birmingham



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B15 2TT, United Kingdom
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