

COMMUNITY ALPHABET

LETTING COMMUNITY LEAD



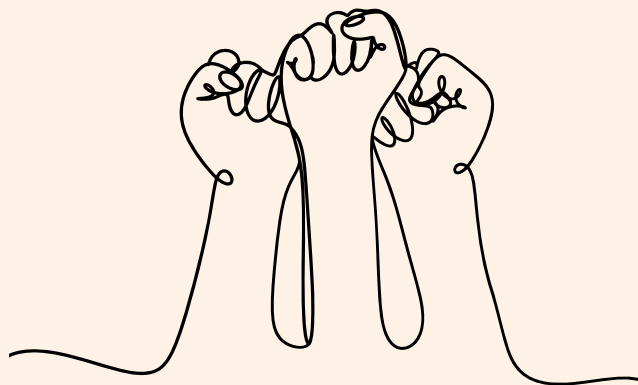
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WHAT IS LETTING COMMUNITY LEAD?

When you think about your community, do you focus on what it needs, or what it already has? Do you think about what the people in the community can do themselves, or where they can get help from outside the community?

By letting community lead, we mean processes where **people in a community collaboratively tackle issues** that are important to them, either with or without the support of a community development professional or agency.¹

Some community development approaches begin by asking: what are the problems in the community, what is this community missing, or what does it need? These are called “**deficit-based approaches**” because their starting point is the **problems, short-comings, wants** or **needs** of the community. Often public resources are then sought to address the problems or needs.



Other approaches begin by asking: what is already **strong in the community**? What **existing skills or knowledge** do local people and locally-based organisations have, which they can use for the good of the community?

¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies, [What is community development?](#), July 2023. Retrieved 15 September, 2024.

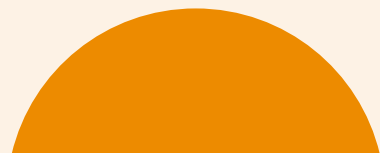
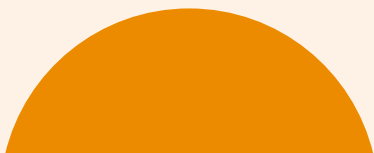
WHAT IS LETTING COMMUNITY LEAD?

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These are called “**asset-based approaches**” because their starting point is the **strengths** of the community – the **people, relationships** between them, **organisations, places, history** and **stories**. For more on the differences between deficit and asset-based thinking, see the list of resources at the end of this thematic bloc.

In short, letting community lead refers to approaches that:

- View the community in terms of its **assets (capacities, skills)** rather than its problems, needs and incapacities
- Put residents, and sometimes also regular visitors to the community, **in the driver's seat** by giving them space to develop and pursue ideas for community activities, initiatives and changes. This approach is about **embracing the entire community**, including individuals often overlooked or on the margins. You can read more in the [Identity and diversity thematic bloc](#) and [Inclusive dialogue thematic bloc](#).



INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

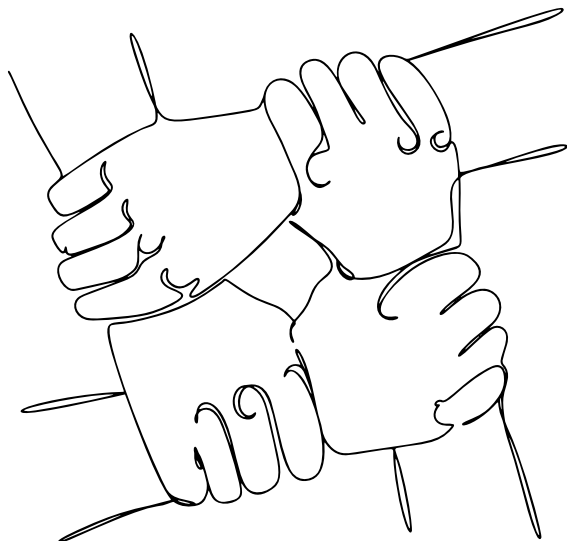
Have you encountered community efforts that were either asset- or deficit-based? How did you experience each one?

WHY IS LETTING COMMUNITY LEAD IMPORTANT?

"It is the capacities of local people and their associations that build powerful communities." - H. Daniel Duncan

Letting community lead is about enhancing interaction and discussion in a community to give all community members opportunities to pursue the varied interests they have. And, wherever possible, giving them opportunities to identify and/or strengthen common interests and solidarity.

We call this approach **community building** instead of community development because we believe – and see in practice – that **enhancing the interconnectedness between people** and **sense of shared space** – both social and physical space – makes for an active community. The word ‘development’ implies a one-sided view on what the ‘needs’ are and what ‘needs’ to be done. This can too easily be dominated by one group or one person’s views.



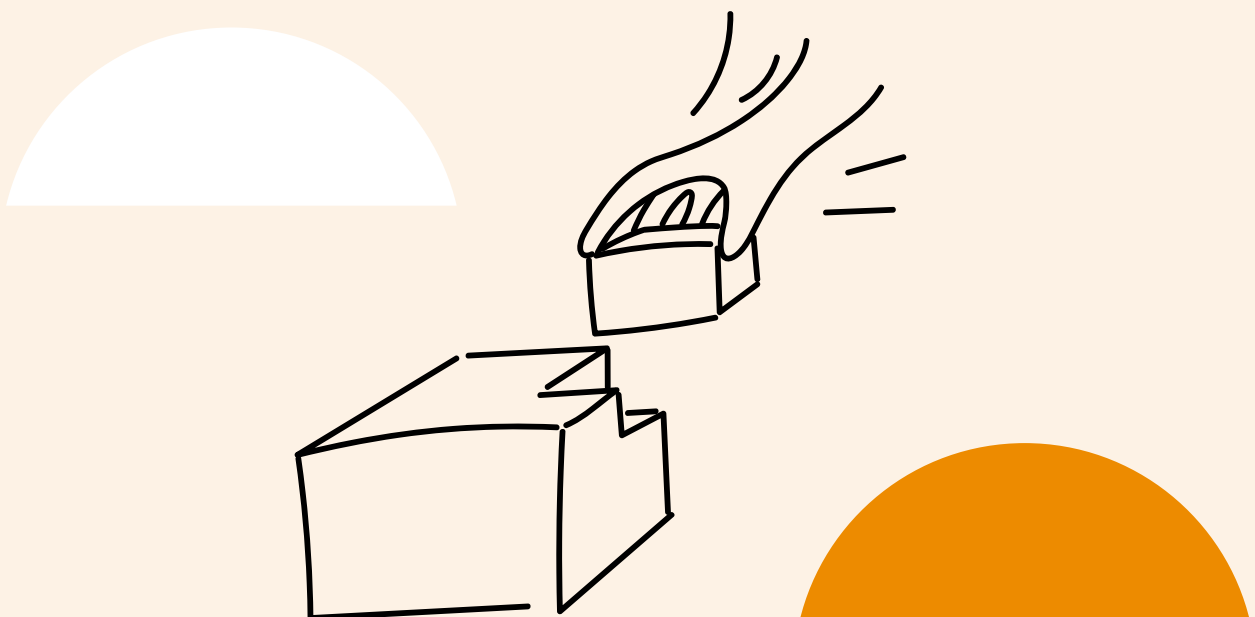
Community building **starts with the people in a community** and what they can do to make the community better.

WHAT DOES LETTING RESIDENTS LEAD BRING?

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Letting community lead benefits a community because:

- **Locals know their community best.** Outsiders might not see some resources, or recognize them as valuable.
- **Diversity enriches the community.** An inclusive approach taking in the diverse (and shared) interests of each community member brings new ideas, awareness and a richness to community life.
- **Sustainable community action is built on local assets.** Residents often have a strong bond to the place and to one another, both of which encourage them to take a long-term view of community development. They tend to care about what their community is like now - and what it will be like in 10, 20 or even 50 years. And when residents use their own capacities and skills in community-oriented activities, they reinforce their **sense of belonging** to the community, expand **local social networks** and **build trust** that is important in developing further activities as well as responding to moments of difficulty or crisis.



RESIDENT-DRIVEN ACTIVITIES IN PRACTICE

In Carnisse and Charlois in South Rotterdam, local residents are changing the way their urban neighbourhoods look and feel. Here are a few of the many resident-driven activities:

The “[Buurtmakers](#)” are neighbours who fix up the area in front of their homes with plants and benches, making the street greener and more inviting.

The **Goewe (Kl)ouwe circular workshop** is a very open repair and DIY place run by several residents. Anyone can come if they:

- find doing odd jobs together more sociable
- don't have enough space at home
- want to discuss the best way to do something
- want to try something new
- want to borrow tools
- want to rummage around in the materials bank
- or want to curl up in a corner with a DIY book.



The [Kunst & Vliegfabriek](#) is a neighbourhood arts club run by local residents and entrepreneurs. People - often young people - work together on, and enjoy, creative workshops and performances of music, spoken word, poetry, DJs and stories. It is a place where creativity leads to interaction!

RESIDENT-DRIVEN ACTIVITIES IN PRACTICE

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The Carnisser neighbourhood oven is a **mobile bread oven** that can be used by residents of the area. The brightly coloured oven was built by three local residents (with support for its construction from the municipality) and makes regular trips to different parts of Carnisse to bake bread with and for residents and passers-by.

Source: Jeannette van der Burgh

When people see the oven, they usually have a lot of questions: Yes, *it's free, and no, we're not from the church. The oven is for the neighbourhood and can be used for all kinds of activities... A series of distilling and baking workshops is announced for future 'Carnisser Buurtoven Bakkers' (neighbourhood oven bakers). Nargis, who has lived in Carnisse for 11 years, is looking forward to learning how to stoke and bake.*²

The oven can be requested for local events such as clean-up days and the Green Parade, where residents help maintain local green spaces. But the principal benefit of the neighbourhood oven is that people **gather around it, grab a bite to eat or learn how to bake bread together...and build relationships.**

² Jeannette van der Burgh, "[Vuurdoop](#)" (Bakkerij de Eenvoud, 2023)

RESIDENT-DRIVEN ACTIVITIES IN PRACTICE

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Den Andel is a small village (pop. 400) on the northern Dutch coast that is anything but a sleepy backwater: it seems everyone in the village is involved in some community activities. Since the 1960s, Den Andel has attracted artists and other people who wanted to live in a close-knit community. Gradually, passionate individuals began **offering their skills and interests** for the good of the community.



They have created a community centre and thrift shop where people can donate or buy old things, an active choir, an energy cooperative with solar panels, a community garden, regular pool tournaments, a gym and a community woodworking studio. All of these activities are **led by and open to residents**.

Alongside this dense network of community activities, residents have created a **vision document** that addresses longer-term areas of community concern such as housing, the environment, energy, etc. Den Andel's community organisations hold an **open house** four times a year where residents discuss these themes and strategise on implementation of the vision, and where anyone can suggest a new community activity.

The community's motto is ***If it is to be, it is up to me!***

KEY PRINCIPLES OF ASSET-BASED APPROACHES

The principles and aspects listed below draw on the work of the [ABCD Institute](#) and its founders John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, as well as the work of Cormac Russell and [Nurture Development](#). You can find many other resources on asset-based approaches online.

Asset-based approaches are grounded in these key principles:



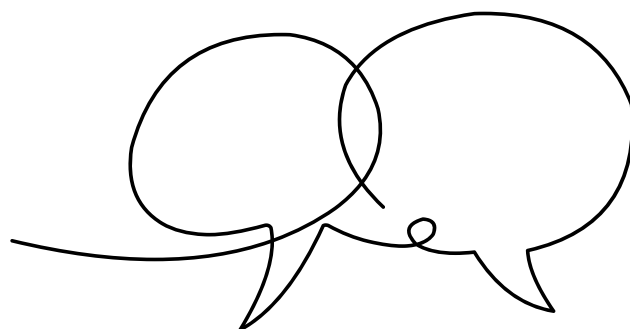
- communities are built on **relationships**
- everyone has **something to share** to build a stronger community
- everyone **cares deeply** about something
- **residents themselves should drive changes** in their community
- **place-based** residents' groups are essential to engagement

ASPECTS OF ASSET-BASED APPROACHES

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Using asset-based approaches (letting community lead, in other words) in community building means paying close attention to:

- Focusing on **strengths, capacities, skills** that are already present in the community
- Finding ways of understanding, drawing out and/or offering ways or spaces to **put those strengths into practice**
- Putting the initiative **in the community's hands** and leading from behind
- Being grounded in the place by **working within a local geographical area** where people have personal interactions and ties to the place
- **Building relationships through face-to-face interactions** because strengthening the interconnectedness between people and sense of shared space makes for an active community



ASPECTS OF ASSET-BASED APPROACHES

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- Pro-actively **reaching out to the margins** to include everyone, even those who are typically excluded, forgotten or those perceived as having little to offer the community. This means engaging one-on-one with people who are not typically involved or included in community activities as well as helping create connections between people who don't typically interact around community activities. For more on this, see the Inclusive dialogue and Power dynamics and bias thematic blocs.

As you think about these key points, you can see that it's not so much about going from step A to step B and so on. It's about **how** it's done.

It's about the **thought, consideration and care** that we put into community building. It is therefore also about carefully **reflecting on our own role** as community builders.



OUR ROLE IN COMMUNITY BUILDING

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When we want to let residents lead, and give them space to develop and pursue ideas, where does that put us?

It is important to consider our role in relation to the community. The **To/for/with/by model**, as explained by Cormac Russell in this Op-ed entitled [Four Modes of Change](#), presents a helpful framework for understanding different approaches to community development.³



This does not mean that community builders, public entities or other local actors do not have roles to play in bringing about changes in a community. Adopting a **with** or **by** approach means supporting residents in innovating and implementing changes themselves. In contrast, **to** or **for** approaches forget that communities are principally **spaces of social interaction**, where **diversity in perspectives and views abound**, and where involving and recognising residents' skills and interests can foster **collaboration** and **more sustainable change**.

³ Cormac Russell, [Four Modes of Change](#). *Hindsight* 28 (Winter 2018-2019). Retrieved 21 November, 2024.

TYPES OF ASSETS

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Community assets can be much **broader than what we might imagine**. An asset can be a cultural hall where we can hold meetings, a baker who donates cakes for community events, a shared sense of history and pride, or a cherished public space.

Community assets are typically divided into these categories:

- **talents and skills of local residents**
- **power of local associations**
- **resources of local institutions**
- **physical** resources and ecology of local places
- **economic** resources of local places
- **stories** and **heritage** of local places

Another way to look at assets is considering **where they are generated** - i.e., the sources of assets:



INDIVIDUALS

in the community



ASSOCIATIONS

both registered and
informal



INSTITUTIONS

public, private and
non-profit

IDENTIFYING, CONNECTING AND MOBILISING ASSETS

How do we work with the assets in a community? Most asset-based approaches involve three key actions:

- **Discovering** the skills, gifts and interests of residents
- **Asking** people to share their skills and gifts around the issues they care about
- **Connecting** people with the same interests to act collectively for the common good

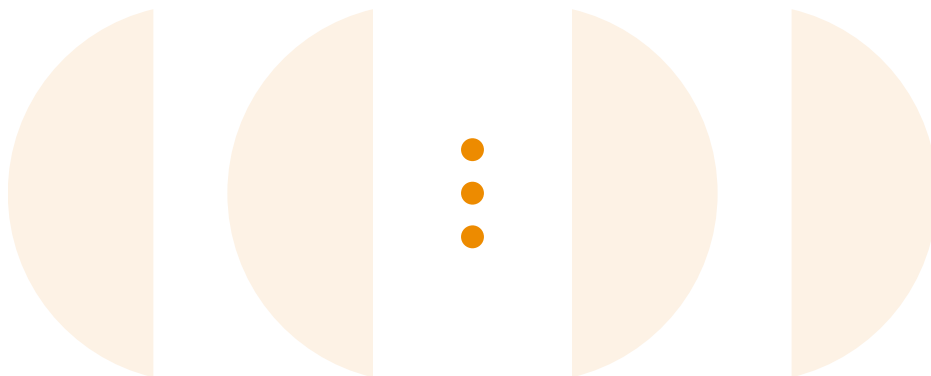
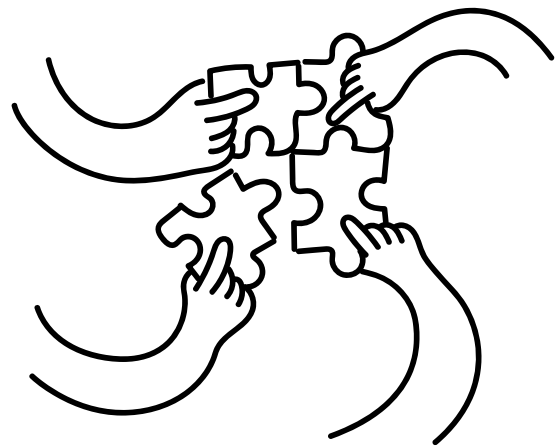


EXPLORING A COMMUNITY'S ASSETS

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Drawing people out about their interests and skills and how they might be put to use for the benefit of the community is not a one-time step; It is most of all a mindset and requires ongoing attention to relationship building and active listening!

It is also not something you should try to pursue entirely on your own: there are probably people in the community who already play some key roles as '**connectors**' - people with a natural talent for relationship building and connecting people - who can help.⁴

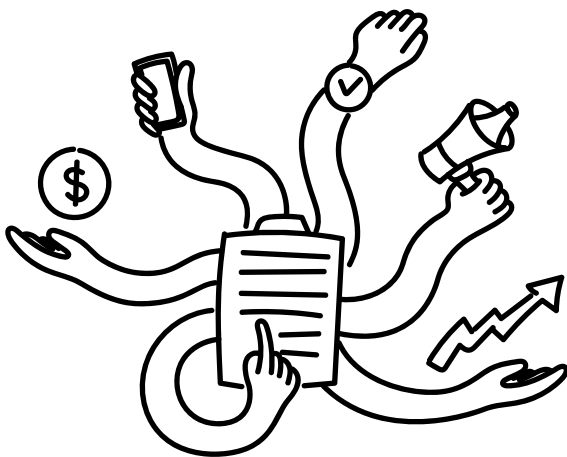


⁴ Cormac Russell of [Nurture Development](#) and others (Joe Erpenbeck, etc.) have advanced the idea of community 'connectors' as important actors in asset-based community development. You can read more about the role of connectors in community building in e.g. Cormac Russell's [Asset-based Community Development: An Incomplete Guide](#) (especially chapter 6.0 and Annex 1. See the Resources section below).

EXPLORING A COMMUNITY'S ASSETS

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In certain situations it may be helpful to begin by organising a somewhat more structured process to gather information on assets. This can include **semi-structured 'listening conversations'** with residents or **asset inventories**. For more on listening conversations see the [Active listening thematic bloc](#) and [these tips and sample questions from a CA participant](#). See also this [case study on using listening conversations](#) to understand a community better.



During an **asset inventory**, an approach developed by John L. McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, residents **map visible assets** such as organisations, institutions, etc. and then have **structured conversations with other residents** to uncover their interests, skills and what they care deeply about.⁵

⁵ John L. McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. (Institute for Policy Research, 1993).

GATHERING RESIDENTS TO IDENTIFY ASSETS

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An alternative to individual listening conversations or an asset inventory can be seen in the [Asset Based Community Development - how to get started handbook](#) (see the Resources section below) based on Norwegian experiences. Here, the authors propose asking these initial questions:

- What do you care so much about that you are willing to do something about it?
- What personal talents, skills and motivations can you contribute with?
- What will it take to get others to join?

The same [Asset Based Community Development handbook](#) offers very practical ideas of how to convene community discussions that focus on assets. You can find another, slightly longer list of possible questions in [Porch Time - Learning Conversations](#).⁶

It is not necessary to ask exactly these questions. But however you may approach the identification of community assets, it is important to ask open-ended questions, listen actively and pay attention to the relational dynamics involved in asking more personal questions.



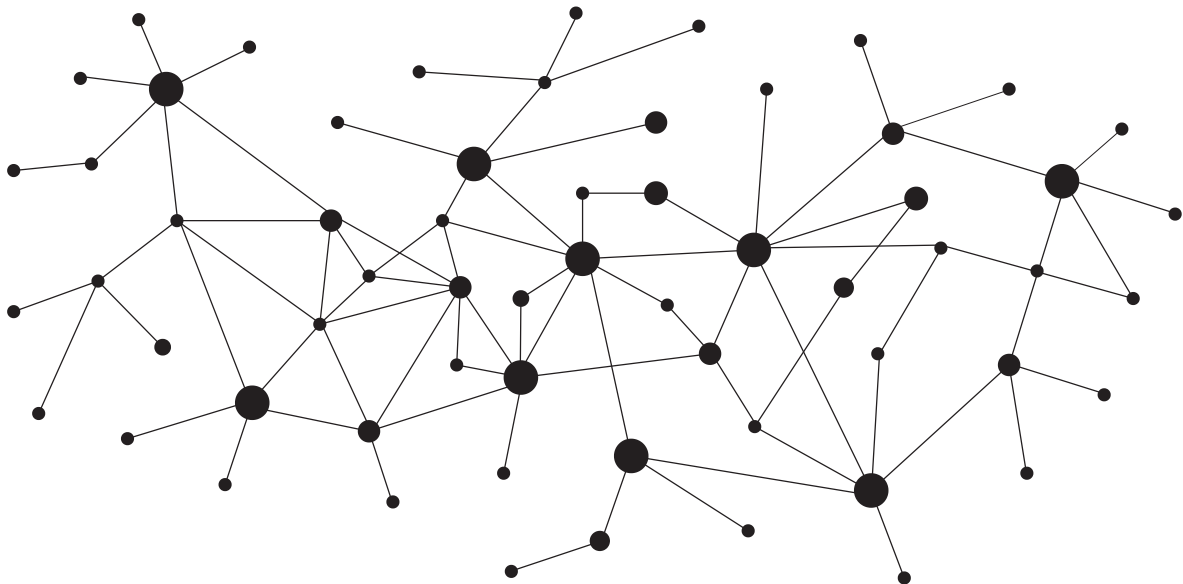
⁶ Dan Duncan, "[Porch Time - Learning Conversations](#)" (H. Daniels Consulting). Retrieved 14 November, 2024.

CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH SHARED INTERESTS

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Once residents' interests and skills have been identified - whether through listening conversations, an asset inventory, gatherings or other means - a next step can be **connecting people with shared interests**. This can often lead to a **new activity or collaboration**.

Connecting people can be as simple as inviting two or three people with shared interests to **chat over coffee**, and seeing what emerges from the conversation. You can also **host a community gathering** or small party for more people, where you can introduce people with shared interests to one another. This can also be done at existing community events.



Forever Manchester, a community foundation, has a strong practice of discovering assets in the community and connecting people with shared interests, which is described in this [toolkit for community builders](#) (see the Resources section below).



RESOURCES

- TedxExeter talk by Cormac Russell: TEDx Talks. "[Sustainable Community Development: From What's Wrong to What's Strong | Cormac Russell | TEDxExeter](#)", 16 May, 2016. Retrieved 10 November, 2024. *The talk explores how to focus on what's strong rather than what's wrong.*
- Agdal, Rital and Inger Helen Midtgard, with collaboration of Cormac Russell. [Asset-based Community Development - how to get started](#). (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, 2019). Retrieved 20 October, 2024.
A handbook of very practical suggestions for asset-based community building (exercises, questions to pose, etc.) and examples from Norway.
- Russell, Cormac. [Asset-based Community Development: An Incomplete Guide](#). (Nurture Development, 2021). Retrieved 15 September, 2024.
An ebook on asset-based community development.
- McKnight, John L. and Jody Kretzmann. [Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Towards Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets](#). (Asset-based Community Development Institute, 1993). Retrieved 10 September, 2024.
Introduction to working with community assets that covers 5 steps: mapping assets, building relationships, mobilising for economic development & information sharing, convening the community and leveraging outside resources.
- Forever Manchester. "[This is Your Toolkit](#)." (Forever Manchester, 2016). Retrieved 30 November, 2024.
This toolkit provides practical guidance on the various steps to exploring your community and community building.

Return to the [Useful tools page](#).