

Making it Happen

Stage Two: Interim Evaluation Report 2022-2023

Summary

collaborate
for social change



Introduction

The evaluation seeks to understand the potential for the programme to influence the adoption of ABCD alongside the ways that ABCD approaches are generating improvements in health and wellbeing through supporting community action and voice.

Findings are documented regarding progress on and inhibitors of developments in advancing pivotal shifts in East Sussex from a systemic perspective.

The aim is to provide learning to those involved with delivering the programme, from the on-the-ground delivery staff to those overseeing the work.

About Making it Happen

Making it Happen (MiH) is a 5.5-year programme commissioned by East Sussex County Council Public Health department. It began in October 2019 and will run until March 2025.

Five local organisations work in partnership to deliver the programme. The partnership is led by Sussex Community Development Association, who are working with 3VA, Action in Rural Sussex, Hastings Voluntary Action and Rother Voluntary Action.

The programme takes an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach to strengthen and support local community capacity to take collective action, with the primary goal being to improve wellbeing and reduce health inequalities.

At its heart, it is about building the confidence and capability of people to come together in their neighbourhoods to create positive change and tackle local issues that matter to them most.

Collaborate CIC

- Collaborate CIC were appointed as Phase Two Evaluators to the programme and began their evidence collection and analysis in 2023, following an initial period of co-design and collection method development in late 2022.
- [Collaborate CIC](#) is a social enterprise that supports places, partnerships, and people across the UK to work together to improve social outcomes. The organisational ethos asserts that collaboration is the route to addressing complex social challenges and structural inequalities, and their mission is to build a [Collaborative Society](#).



Methodology

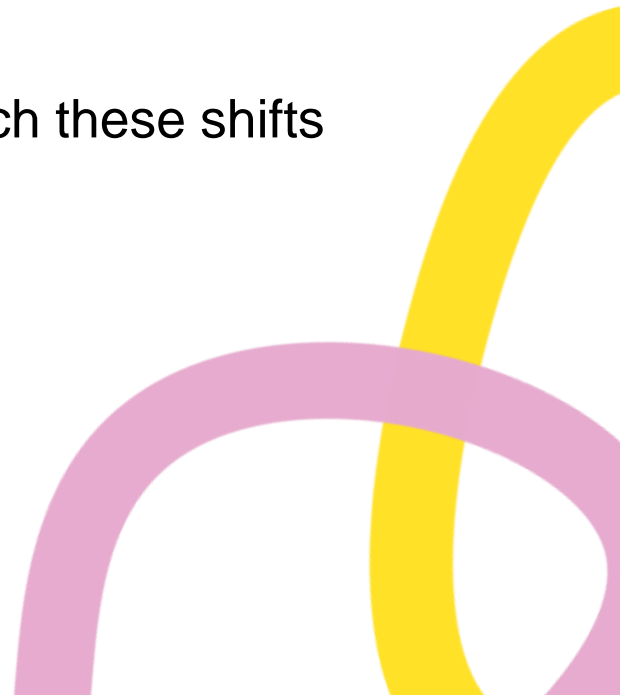
- The approach explores if, how, and why MiH works and for whom, in the areas where it is delivered, to illustrate how change is happening.
- The evaluation is focused on activity that is part of the work itself, encapsulated in the phrase: ‘from the work, through the work’.
- Alongside exploring the effect MiH has had on the communities it has worked with, the evaluation has explored what, if any, effect MiH has had on the wider system.
- In 2023, the programme was evaluated in five stages:
 1. creation of the analytical framework,
 2. evidence collection (after co-design of the methods),
 3. midpoint review,
 4. analysis and
 5. collective sensemaking, and reporting.

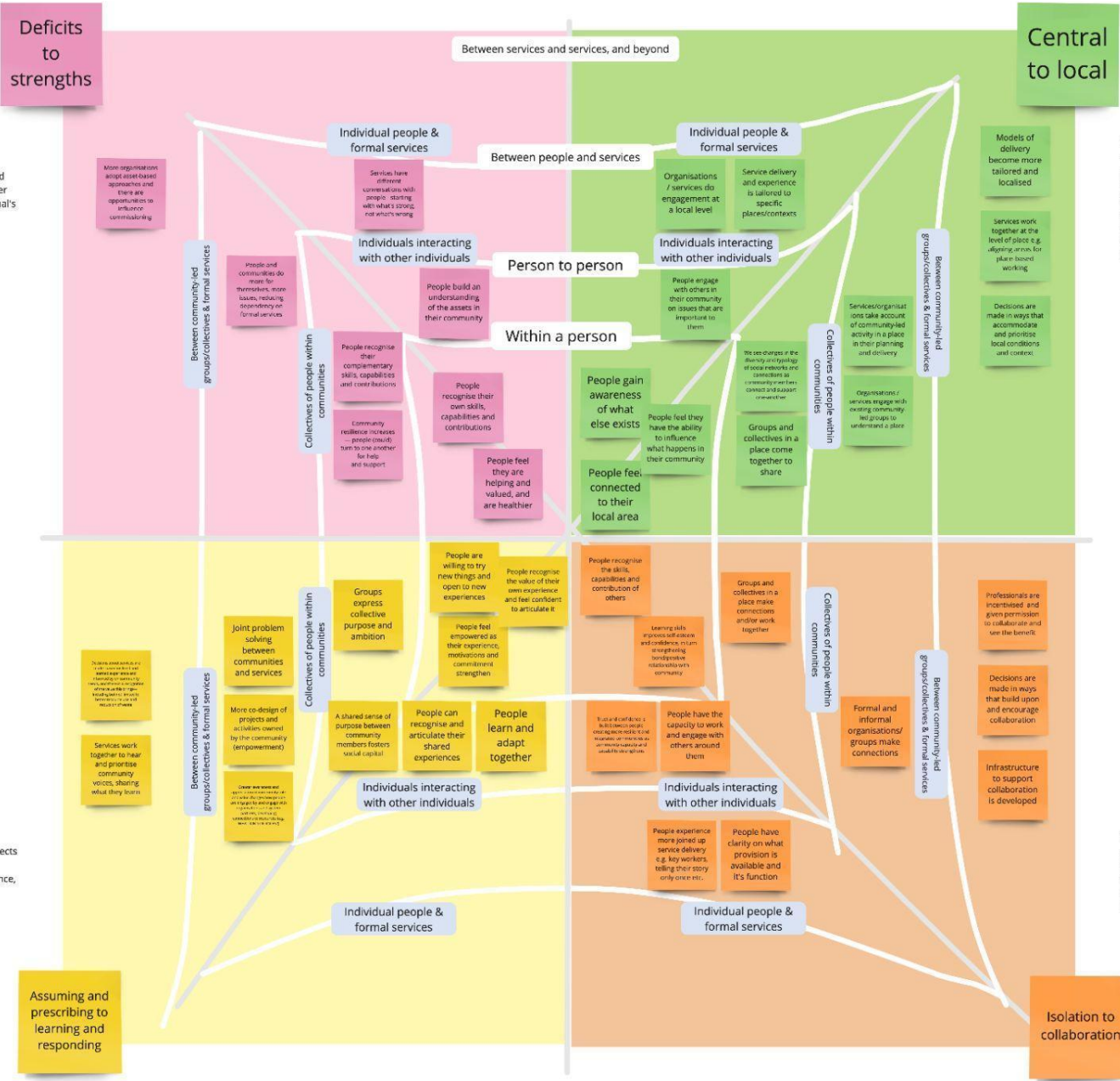
Evidence Collection

Evidence Collection method	Data collected
Story collection – drawing on a range of tools for capturing reflections created by CDWs, a story collection template was created alongside guidance to draw out powerful stories	39 stories
Grant reviews – using existing templates whilst supporting a working group of CDWs involved in reviewing all of the grant paperwork	114 grant reviews
Community survey – designed to gather thoughts and feelings about being involved with a community based project, activity, group or event	87 survey responses
Stakeholder survey – Capturing initial thoughts from stakeholders current understanding of ABCD and MIH	36 survey responses
Stakeholder focus groups – following on from the survey to undertake a deeper delve into some of the insight gathered	26 invited with 7 attendees
ABCD Conversations – this work sought to understand the potential for MIH to influence others in the adoption of ABCD approaches via attendance at events	Big Sparks event Big Sparks Next Steps event Four Shifts event

The Four Shifts Framework

- The four shifts themselves arose from a review of materials from the previous evaluation including the Programme Theories, alongside ideas from conversations with the Core Evaluation Group during the discovery phase about what change in the system MiH might contribute to.
- Collaborate cross-referenced notes from these conversations with CDWs' own theories of change, and factored in their own understanding of system change.
- As well as the shifts, the framework references the various levels at which these shifts might occur:
 - inside a person,
 - between people,
 - between people and services, and
 - between services and services or at the system level.





Individuals and communities are recognised for their strengths, and supported to build on these, rather than focusing only on the individual's or place's needs and deficits.

Moving from one-size-fits all approaches at large geographic areas to a relational neighbourhood-based focus. Understanding the value of relationships and connections on the ground within a community and how that can shape the operations within it, rather than a blanket approach across a large area.

Professionals start with what's happening on the ground, rather than prescribing or imposing projects or solutions. Lived experience is valued alongside learned experience, and the community voices shape both what and how services are delivered in a community.

Individuals, groups and organisations work collaboratively rather than in isolation from each other, making the most of the resources available and enabling better, joined-up provision within communities.

Headline Findings

If, why, how and for whom the programme works

How it Happens



- Most change is seen ‘within a person’ and at ‘person to person’ levels in terms of ‘Deficits to strengths’ and ‘Isolation to Collaboration’ shifts.
- Within a person:
 - Increases in self-confidence and self-esteem;
 - lifestyle changes including exercising and socialising more, leading to self-reported improvements in physical and mental wellbeing; and
 - developing new skills and capabilities which in some cases have translated into opportunities for employment etc. as well as greater sustainability of projects.
- Person to person:
 - Through participating in activities and projects, people have the opportunity for more and deeper connection with others;
 - They feel joy together and have positive shared experiences which contribute to a sense of community, belonging and wellbeing.

How it Happens *continued*



- There is some evidence of change at the ‘people and services’ level (though less than above). Primarily this change is:
 - Connections between formal and informal groups which results in more people finding out about and accessing the MiH activities, which in turn increases the number of people who experience the benefits of connection and the asset-based approach.
 - Connections being made between groups or services that do a similar thing or might be useful/relevant to the same people.
- Changes in how formal services (the ‘services and services and beyond’ level) are operating appear to be limited at the moment.
 - There are one or two examples of groups proactively reaching out to formal services to support/understand their community better and some staff actively seeking input from the MiH team and CDWs to get support to develop their ideas and initiatives.

How it Happens *continued*

- Those benefiting and changed most by MiH are those closest to the community work:
 - The people who have set up activities and projects with the support of CDWs, others who volunteer to help run them, and the neighbours, peers and community members who join in.
 - Learning shared by CDWs suggest that their experiences of the programme are having a meaningful impact for them as individuals and in their practice.
- Impact was also seen in people and professionals who are connected through local networks and similar services and who attend events like Big Sparks .
- Professionals at a more strategic level currently seem to be the least impacted by MiH, though those who have had some contact with the programme are positive about their experiences.

For Whom it Happens



- The ABCD approach means that MiH activities are built from the community-up; rather than seeking to create activities or services for a particular cohort, projects that emerge are a result of what the community cares about and wants to put their energies in.
- Demographic data collection is often seen as a barrier to community engagement, which is why MiH has made a conscious effort to develop the programme through relational working, with less of a focus on data collection.
- The range of activities and projects MiH supports includes ‘open to all’ groups, groups built around a specific locality (e.g. on an estate) and groups aligned with specific communities of interest or identity including those with various characteristics protected under the Equalities Act.

For Whom it Happens

continued

- Evidence suggests that ABCD approaches are likely to be more inclusive than traditional forms of engagement with marginalised communities.
- *However*, programmes like MiH need to be aware of structural barriers to participation, and therefore programme delivery, relating to unequal distribution of power and access to resources, including social capital.
- As such, MiH is unlikely to be reaching the most marginalised and deprived people in the community through the use of ABCD approaches alone.
- Therefore, MiH could be more purposeful in building the diversity of people who participate in activities.

Why it Happens



- This evaluation has sought to explore what findings illustrate about the wider system in East Sussex and the operation of MiH in that context.
- In many cases, MiH enables change even in the face of constraints in the wider system. Most constraints are characteristics of the system in which the programme operates and require collective action from system stakeholders to address.
- *However*, we also see evidence of how MiH can face some of these constraints more effectively than similar programmes, which others can learn from.

Why it Happens *continued*

- These insights constitute important background for the full findings which are organised by the four shifts.
- Key elements about the way MiH is set up could and should be replicated in other programmes and funding streams as we have seen them to be enablers of the four shifts — regardless of the future of the MiH programme.
- There are also ways, highlighted in the following slides, and in the final recommendations, that working at the system level could remove some constraints MiH has faced.

Enactment of ABCD



- Naturally, one of the most notable of these key elements is the effective and widespread fulfilment of ABCD principles in starting from what's there, including local assets.
- **Physical assets and spaces to meet are fundamental to the ability of many MiH projects and activities to operate.**
- Provision of these assets is mixed across the Districts and Boroughs, and access to these is one of the greatest sources of anxiety and frustration for participants.
- East Sussex, like most areas across the country, has seen a loss of social assets within their local communities.
- These assets are essential for small projects to grow. For many projects, a large proportion of their spending goes to room hire fees and funding spaces to gather to develop the work together, suggesting that overall a substantial proportion of overall grant funding is going towards meeting this basic need for community space.
- If MiH did not exist, groups would still need this threshold amount of money to have a foundation on which to build.

Accessible Funding



- **The flexibility of MiH carries through in the distribution of funding within the programme;** it is a lot more accessible, flexible and relational with support available to complete the applications. With its low barriers to access, it is trust-based/led, with time and space for things to grow.
- How people in communities get funding for their activities is more relational than other types of funding that exist.
- There is also more flexibility on what the MiH grants can be spent on, determined by what would be most effective for the activity.
- Generally, communities felt that the information needed for each stage of the MiH grants was proportionate to the amount of funding received.
- During the community sensemaking workshop, the funding process was summed up as an ‘adult-to-adult’ relationship, that was supportive of their projects.

Accessible Funding *continued*


- Small amounts of funding ‘unlock’ other amounts of resources that are not costed.
- This is not just resource to be absorbed or adapted to align with statutory agendas, it only occurs when there is community interest — but it does add significant value to the community that otherwise would not be available.
- Success in fundraising is unsurprisingly a significant contributor to either positive or negative feelings about a project or activity depending on whether it is present or absent, how easy it is to obtain, and for how long it is available.
- Efforts to further simplify application forms can also help ease the way.
- Given MiH ABCD principles, there may be some benefit in exploring other decision making approaches and how the community can have more say in what project receives money.
- There are issues of longevity for these projects and there’s a clear issue with setting up bank accounts so that people can hold funding.

Support Structures



- **The role that CDWs play has been crucial to the successes achieved by the MiH programme, and is greatly valued.**
- CDWs entire focus is on supporting communities. The CDWs offer practical support to those within communities, lessening the burden of developing their ideas and supporting on things that community members are more likely to find difficult.
- CDWs act as connectors and stewards of the local system, with local knowledge and local networks that can link people and assets together than community members may have otherwise been unaware of.
- Given their position across a local area, they can also act as translators of insight and learning across their geographies, and collectively they can provide insight across a wide area of East Sussex.

Support Structures *continued*

- Support from CDWs and volunteers is extremely important so that those holding this responsibility are not alone, running the risk of burning out.
 - There is a cost (sometimes perceived as a burden) to community members of setting up and leading projects and activities, especially for those who are structurally disadvantaged and struggling to meet their fundamental needs.
 - The presence and commitment of wider volunteers makes a big difference for lessening the burden on organisers as well as contributing to the longevity or sustainability of activities.
 - Where there is only a small number of people interested in a certain activity, if there are fluctuations in those interested (especially due to the time that some projects take to set up and get off the ground), interest can waver, as can volunteer numbers.
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Support Structures *continued*



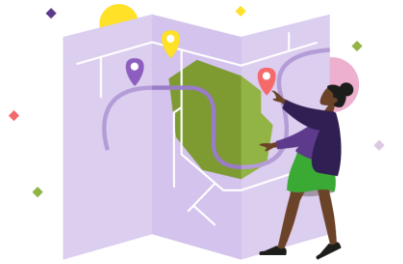
- The programme could consider focusing on building collectives that may have different activities as part of it but benefit from shared functions/infrastructure.
- Some ideas from the community can be large in scope and aims, so CDWs help people to identify initial steps and tests they can try, supporting them to walk before they run.
- As such, MiH seems to play a key role in helping make ideas a reality by cautioning people from doing too much too soon.
- The CDW and community sensemaking sessions highlighted a perceived need for getting people with the ideas more dedicated support.
- The community survey illustrated how negative feelings come from facing constraints, while the positive feelings come from overcoming them.

Engagement with the Wider System




- **The evidence collected suggests that the impact of activity at higher levels of the system has not been felt or perceived by the CDWs or the community members we engaged with and gathered data from.**
- CDWs themselves felt that there was little space for more strategic engagement with the wider system and felt that type of engagement was a much different function and skill set than their main role working directly with communities.
- Where there was interaction between MiH and higher parts of the system, this was largely one-way interaction i.e. someone or a service looking to benefit from MiH's connections and knowledge of the local community, rather than aiming to build more collaborative ways of working.

Local Focus



- **In setting up MiH, a decision was taken that the programme should operate on a geographic basis.**
- This was in part to the large disparity of health inequalities that can exist between areas within the borough or district boundaries and the need to have a focus on these areas. For much of the programme, this has been an important choice, enabling CDWs to build relationships across their local area.
- Operationally this has also caused some challenge, as some ideas or themes do not exist solely in a single geographical area and some geographical areas have more of a cohesive identity than others.
- While there is scope to support communities of interest through MiH which cross different geographic areas, the majority of the work is very locally based within specific areas and neighbourhoods of the places where MiH is operating.

Local Focus *continued*

- Through local working, CDWs are able to build a rich understanding of what's out there and what can be mobilised and shared wider.
 - They are able to connect, share and network to bring different members of the community together, supporting people to become co-organisers as well as bringing together potential participants and volunteers.
 - *However*, communities are not delineated by administrative boundaries. Communities of interest may not be found in a small geographical area and sometimes the net will need to be cast wider to engage a sufficient number of people to make an activity sustainable.
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Emphasis on Learning



- The way MiH operates engages effectively with the messy reality of community work, where there is not a straight-line between inputs and outcomes and where understanding the context and how it is constantly shifting is key.
- **Adopting a learning culture is a key part of this.** CDWs are allowed to fail and focus on learning in MiH. Outcomes are learning outcomes; CDWs can identify what to learn more about and how to enable communities to learn also.
- In this way, the CDWs have developed an approach to supporting communities in a natural, relational way, building on their experience as they work.
- Community members value that CDWs work with them to learn when things don't go to plan, enabling them to continue developing their projects. It can take time to find an approach that works to build on an initial idea, but the development along the way is instrumental.

Emphasis on Learning *continued*

- Applying these and the wider lessons from MiH can be challenging.
- Some of those delivering the programme have felt that MiH has been commissioned as a research project, with interested stakeholders seemingly waiting to engage with the 'end result' rather than seeing it as a living project from which others could and should engage with and learn from along the way.
- This is a common issue across our current commissioning models in the UK.
- Programme delivery is rightly focused on improving lives for those in the communities they support, but there is heavy requirement for data and information that confirms that the money has been spent effectively.

Emphasis on learning *continued*

- The types of information that help us run programmes effectively and that tells us whether we are delivering good value for money are often different and can create competition for resources that are often stretched.
- It is important that this tension is recognised and managed, so that the programme is able to fulfil both functions as effectively as it can with the resource it has available.
- It's important that we see MiH as an opportunity to 'test' an ABCD approach as well as an effort of ongoing learning and reflection about how the wider system in East Sussex operates, which can be acted on now.

Recommendations



1. Identify, clarify and make accessible the learning about the key enablers, approaches and processes that have contributed to MiH's effectiveness and that could be hard-wired into other programmes beyond MiH and the wider system.
2. Develop a purposeful strategy for engaging the wider system and sharing the learning identified above.
3. Embed MiH more effectively in the fabric of the wider VCFSE sector.
4. Build a movement, not just a collection of projects.