

Commissioning community champions

Lessons from a pandemic

Overview

- Community champions are typically members of the community who volunteer to promote health and wellbeing or improve conditions in their local community. The community champion approach is one of many community-led approaches to improving health and wellbeing.
- In 2023, The King's Fund conducted a survey of local authority commissioners of community champions programmes in England to understand the breadth of commissioning approaches. In addition, we interviewed people involved in the commissioning and delivery of community champions programmes across 15 local authorities to understand local approaches to commissioning and learning.
- Community champions can add value by sharing information and supporting engagement with communities, building trust and increasing the capacity to engage with and support public health within the community. We found that community champions add particular value in being able to engage with communities that have previously been perceived to be invisible from the existing public health and engagement processes of statutory bodies.
- Based on our research, we have proposed a series of questions to help commissioners and local decision-makers identify the potential value of community champions to their local system, and the factors that are important to consider for influencing impact.

Why we did this research

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a huge augmentation and expansion of community champions programmes in England, enabled by the availability of national funding. This provided a unique opportunity to capture learning on how community champions can support communities, what supports the commissioning of community champions, and what might contribute to their impact and sustainability.

This research was commissioned by the Department for Health and Social Care and the Office for Health Inequalities and Disparities to explore the development of community champions programmes during the pandemic. The research sought to describe the scale and diversity of programmes and associated learning, with the opportunity to inform the parameters of any future evaluation.

What we did

Our research comprised three elements.

- A scoping review of the literature and published information from local authority and voluntary and community sector websites with known community champions schemes.
- An online survey of local authority commissioners of community champions programmes in England to understand the scale and breadth of commissioning approaches. The survey was sent to 152 upper-tier local authorities and 18 additional lower-tier local authorities that had received national funding. The survey received a total of 92 responses (54% response rate).
- Semi-structured interviews with 15 commissioners or delivery partners of community champions programmes. The interviews explored the approach they took to commissioning community champions programmes, why and what they learnt as a result.

What we found

There were a number of ways in which community champions programmes could add value at a local level. These included:

- supporting engagement with communities to share information, collect insight and support collaboration
- building trust with and between communities, public health and wider stakeholders
- increasing the capacity and capability to engage with and support public health within the community.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, community champions programmes were often focused on supporting specific communities that were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Local authority commissioners reported that community champions had been particularly valuable in being able to engage with these communities as they were frequently groups who were not well reached by existing public health approaches and whose views were often poorly captured in the data gathered through statutory engagement processes.

Our research highlighted that there is no one model for community champions. We identified different approaches to commissioning and delivering community champions programmes, which influence the recruitment of champions, how they are organised and supported, and what they do.

Key strengths of community champions approaches are their flexibility and adaptability. During and after the initial response to Covid-19, community champions programmes continued to evolve, changing aims to address emerging needs, targeting new populations, and building relationships with new partners and networks.

Community champions programmes have unique resource requirements to be effective. These include information and training to support public health activities and the ability to capture insights from the community. At the same time, local authorities and other stakeholders require mechanisms to make use of, and respond to, those insights to improve local service delivery.

The sustainability of community champions programmes is influenced by champions receiving appropriate recognition for their role, investment in their development, and identifying appropriate funding and resourcing. The ability to measure impact is also a key challenge to sustainability.

What next?

The community champions approach is one of many community-led approaches to improving health and wellbeing. Community-led approaches are key to making the most of the assets that exist within communities, building trust with them and better understanding their needs.

Decisions on how and where a community champions approach could benefit local communities will benefit from appropriate consideration of how the needs of those communities, or the commissioning bodies' aims, align with the strengths and design considerations of the community champions approach. These design

considerations are not only valuable in ensuring that there is a clear and agreed set of aims for the approach between the commissioner and delivery partner, but also provide an opportunity to consider future sustainability, including the ability to evolve and adapt to new and emerging needs.

To guide those decisions, we have developed a series of questions for commissioners and local decision-makers. They aim to help establish: what the current role and contribution of community centred approaches are; how a community champion approach could contribute; and what commissioning or delivery model will support those aims.

Within the context of financial pressures and increased demand in NHS organisations and local authorities there is a real risk of community-centred approaches being deprioritised or marginalised. Yet, as our research highlights, during the Covid-19 pandemic, community-centred approaches played a vital role in minimising the health and social impact of the pandemic. It is therefore important that leaders of integrated care systems, local authorities and public health embed the role of community-led approaches in key strategies and plans. This will ensure the continued contribution and support of community-centred approaches in building community engagement and trust, and help to better meet the health and wellbeing needs of communities, as well as potential future health threats.

To read the full report, *Commissioning community champions*, please visit www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/reports/commissioning-community-champions-pandemic.

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