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Community Health Champions:

Improving the relationship citizens have with their health and health services

Caroline regained her independence after brain injury through inclusive cycling. Since then she has helped over 70 people to learn to ride bikes or recumbent trikes. Abdul's life has been transformed since retiring as he now leads therapeutic art walks for groups of Asian men; "if people who saw me 3 years ago saw me now they wouldn't believe it was the same person. I'd recommend it to anyone!"

These are two of many inspiring stories emerging from a far larger social movement. Caroline and Abdul are two of the 15,000 Community and Workplace Health Champions recruited, trained and supported by Altogether Better since 2008. So far they have reached over 90,000 people in their local communities across Yorkshire and the Humber.

This growing social movement is improving the health and well-being of the people involved whilst also transforming the relationship their communities have with health!

A resource for health

Evidence from evaluations has shown that Community Health Champions are effective at increasing healthier lifestyles through improving people's mental health, encouraging healthy eating and physical activity, reducing isolation and improving self-care and management¹. They are able to engage with some of the most hard to reach or seldom heard communities, making them a key asset in meeting the challenge of health inequalities at a local level² and a source of rich intelligence and experience for service planning and delivery.

Community Health Champions help to increase community engagement - the model encourages people to actively influence and shape their communities, often serving as a 'bridge' between communities and health or government services. At a time when the Health and Social Care Bill requires local people to be involved in the development of the JSNA and JHWS, they could be the ideal conduit between communities and health and wellbeing boards.

Information about this tried and tested programme is **now available** at www.altogetherbetter.org.uk. Independent evaluation reports on effectiveness, academic reviews of evidence and case studies are available as well as links to blogs and forums, films and presentations. There is also a growing network of Health Champion projects connecting across the country.

¹South J., White J. and Woodall J. (2010) Altogether Better Community Health Champions and Empowerment. Thematic evaluation summary. Leeds Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Metropolitan University

² Davies, R (2009) Community Health Champions: One of the keys to unlocking the health inequalities challenge?. Centre for Local Economic Strategy (CLES)

An award-winning movement for change

Altogether Better began as a BIG Lottery Wellbeing Programme with the aim of building capacity to empower citizens to improve the health and well-being of their communities in Yorkshire and Humber. In 2011 Altogether Better received the Prime Minister's Big Society Award and was a finalist of the National Lottery Awards Best Health Project. It was highlighted as an example of good practice in the Public Health White Paper and the Marmot Review, Fair Society Equal Lives.

Empowerment is at its heart. 16 local projects, set in communities or workplaces, equip members of the public with the knowledge, confidence and skills they need to make a difference where they live or work.

The Champions

Champions use their own unique life experiences and skills to reach others and to improve the health of people around them through a supportive peer to peer approach. Community Health Champions volunteer in their local area – designing and running activities or groups, talking to people informally about health and offering support. Workplace Health Champions engage with others at their workplace on issues relating to health and wellbeing and promote improved policy and practice to support employees. They decide their own level of involvement – some give hours of their time to deliver regular activities and reach dozens of people whilst others use the learning from the training to influence their own lifestyle and that of their immediate friends and family.

Bridging the health gap

Community Health Champions are reaching thousands of people living in areas with the poorest health or those not accessing health services. Coming from the same area means they are approachable, able to 'speak the same language' and are likely to be trusted. Having potentially experienced similar difficulties is important, *"it's speaking to someone normal who has maybe been through the same thing, you can relate a lot more"*.

Tried and tested results

Evaluating the various models of Community Health Champions is key to Altogether Better. Three independent reviews by Leeds Metropolitan University identified important benefits³⁴⁵

³ South J., Raine G. and White J. (2010), Community Health Champions: Evidence Review.

⁴ Woodall J., Raine G., South J. and Warwick-Booth L. (2010), Empowerment and Health & Well-being: Evidence Review.

⁵ Robinson M., Raine, G. and South, J. (2010), Mental Health and Employment: Evidence Review.

All three evidence reviews from the Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Metropolitan University.

whilst Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis found every project had a positive SROI of between £0.79 - £112.42 for every pound invested⁶.

“(Being a Champion) has changed my life”. Becoming a Community Health Champion increases a person's confidence, gives them new skills and improves their knowledge of health issues. The mental and emotional health of many Champions has improved and they have adopted a healthier lifestyle. For some individuals, it has been a transformative experience helping them rehabilitate, regain a sense of purpose or start on a journey to other opportunities such as paid employment.

This model is a clear example of an **asset based approach**⁷, in that individuals and communities have many assets that can make a positive contribution to improving health and well-being. There is also an intrinsic link to improved health and well-being and increased potential for **social capital**⁸, when an individual feels more valued.

“It's superb what's going on here”. Groups that help tackle unhealthy lifestyles and reduce social isolation have been set up. Many examples of the ‘ripple effect’ exist where people reached by Champions give up smoking, become more active or are signposted to other services.

This flexible Health Champion model is a scalable approach that can be used by different communities and focused on a range of health and well-being outcomes. It has a deep value base and is proven to work. It could transform the relationships citizens have with their own health and well-being and with health and social care services.

For more information visit www.altogetherbetter.org.uk, call 0113 295 2134 or email altogether.better@yorksandhumber.nhs.uk

⁶Hex, N. and Tatlock, S. Altogether Better Social Return on Investment Case Studies (2011). A Report commissioned by the Altogether Better Learning Network, Yorkshire and Humber Public Health Observatory. Produced by York Health Economics Consortium.

⁷Foot, J. and Hopkins, T (2010). A Glass Half Full: how an asset approach can improve community health and well-being. IDEA.

⁸ Frost, S. (2010) Community Health Champions and Social Capital in Deprived Communities. MSc. Dissertation, University of York.