

Altogether Better Community Health Champions and Social Capital

There is increasing interest from Policy makers in the concept of social capital, its link to health and well-being and role in addressing health inequalities. Aligned to this is a rising interest in the mechanisms that may be seen to build social capital, in particular, community development approaches to health improvement. The recent Marmot Review Marmot recommended the promotion of social capital as a policy that would help promote health and well-being and reduce inequalities (Marmot, 2010). Community empowerment is also one of the three strands of the 'Big Society' agenda

The Altogether Better Programme is one such approach that is already showing an impact on social capital in communities across Yorkshire and Humber.

What is Social Capital?

Social capital has been variously defined with a common emphasis on the role of social networks, civil norms and social trust which lead to cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital operates at both individual and community level and is influenced by the extent to which people are embedded within their families, social networks and communities, and have a sense of belonging and civic identity (Morrow, 1999).

Social capital and health

People with high levels of social capital are generally happier, have better mental health, lower mortality rates, and are less likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease and stroke than similar individuals with low levels of social capital (Borgonovi, 2010). Social capital can also be beneficial for health in terms of:

1. Furnishing tangible material assistance which in turn reduces stress.
2. Reinforcing healthy norms and behaviours.
3. Lobbying effectively for improved health services.
4. Interaction in / with social networks may stimulate the body's immune system. (Putnam, 2000, p.326).

About Altogether Better

Altogether Better is a five-year, Big Lottery funded programme which aims to improve well-being in communities in Yorkshire and Humber. Through our 16 projects we have over 12,000 Community Health Champions (CHCs) across the region.

Community Health Champions and Social Capital

Community Health Champions (CHCs) CHCs are lay people recruited from communities who are trained in health promotion and community leadership skills to deliver health messages to their friends, family, colleagues and community members. The CHC model is based on a community empowerment approach which in itself is beneficial for social cohesion, social capital and strengthening relationships and trust among participants (Woodall et al., 2010).

We have evidence that, as well as improving health and well-being outcomes, our projects and Community Health Champions (CHCs) provide a mechanism to influence levels of social capital in communities. We found evidence of social capital related to three broad themes:

1. **Civic and social participation:** CHCs having an ability to influence community affairs, participating and volunteering in community activity and projects, and having increased access to services.
2. **Social networks and support:** CHCs reported increased friends and social networks; having confidence to engage with others; improved interaction with family and friends, and an increase in reciprocity and trust.
3. **Self efficacy and control:** CHCs reported improved self confidence and self esteem; feeling valued and useful and having improved self control.

As social capital benefits both the creator and those around them, the positive effects may ensue for individual CHCs as well as those they come into contact with.

Conclusions

CHCs could be seen as a mechanism to help Government meet targets around:

- reducing health inequalities
- Increasing uptake of services
- Increasing early identification of health problems and reducing risk factors
- Encouraging people to take an active role in their communities

It is crucial that public health interventions involving lay people have adequate resources and support and should also seek to address the barriers to engagement to ensure greater equality of participation in, and access to, such programmes.

Key References

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This summary was derived from an MSc Dissertation entitled, “*Community Health Champions and Social Capital in Disadvantaged Communities*”, produced by Sarah Frost, Learning Network Development Manager, Altogether Better Programme in September 2010.

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