11 September 2024

Subject:	Evaluation of the COVID-19 Community Champions Programme
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Purpose of Report	Information

1   Recommendations

1.1   That the Board considers and comments upon the findings of the COVID-19 Community Champions programme evaluation.

1.2   That members of the Board are requested to support this approach through their own roles and wider networks.

2   Links to Workstreams Set out in the Health and Wellbeing Strategy

Healthy Communities	Community champions are volunteers who act as a bridge between people and health and care services, signposting community members to services, communicating health messages or running outreach sessions to promote health and wellbeing in their communities. They play a valuable role in increasing access to health information and services among those who experience more barriers to engagement. The COVID-19 Community Champions programme helped to communicate important information about keeping safe during the pandemic, and increased trust among underserved and underrepresented communities. The approach is transferable to other initiatives to reduce inequalities in health and wellbeing.

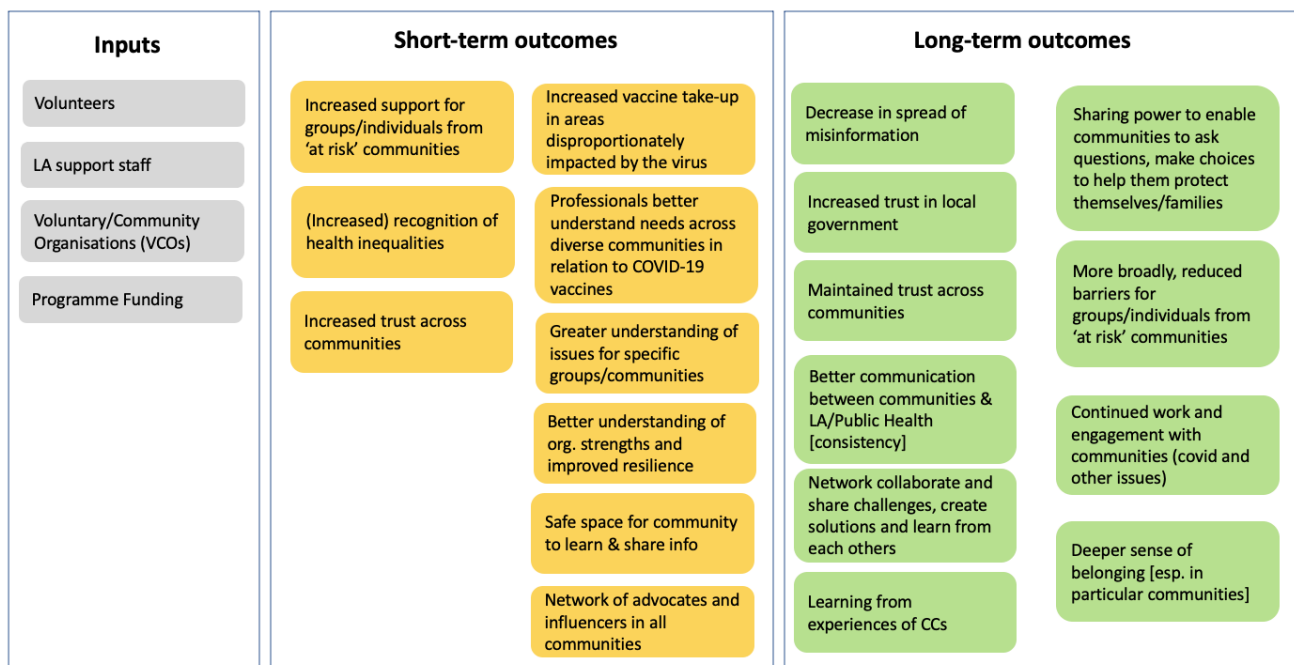| Integrated Town Teams	In addition to linking local people to services, Community Champions can support a more holistic approach to community health and wellbeing by strengthening links between voluntary sector organisations and community groups, including the faith sector, and statutory services in each town. Through working with trusted community members and leaders we were able to build trust and increase engagement with local residents to address an important public health issue.

3 Context and Key Issues

3.1 Three local authorities (LAs) in the West Midlands, Birmingham City, Sandwell, and Walsall received funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to support their COVID-19 Community Champions (CCC) efforts in communicating accurate health information to boost COVID-19 vaccine take up, particularly within those most at risk of the virus. Community champions are volunteers who act as a bridge between people and health and care services, signposting community members to services, communicating health messages or running outreach sessions to promote health and wellbeing in their communities.

3.2 The 3 LAs approached PHIRST for evaluation support. The PHIRST Fusion team consisted of members from the University of Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Newcastle.

3.3 An evaluability assessment was conducted with the three local authorities to understand the priorities for evaluation and develop the evaluation plan.

Three online evaluability assessment workshops conducted with stakeholders from Birmingham, Sandwell and Walsall Local Authorities (February and May 2022).

3.4 This Logic Model of the Agreed Outcome shows the identified inputs into the programme, including funding and staffing, and expected short-term and long-term outcomes.

Inputs

- Volunteers
- LA support staff
- Voluntary/Community Organisations (VCOs)
- Programme Funding

Short-term outcomes

- Increased support for groups/individuals from 'at risk' communities
- (Increased) recognition of health inequalities
- Increased trust across communities
- Increased vaccine take-up in areas disproportionately impacted by the virus
- Professionals better understand needs across diverse communities in relation to COVID-19 vaccines
- Greater understanding of issues for specific groups/communities
- Better understanding of org. strengths and improved resilience
- Safe space for community to learn & share info
- Network of advocates and influencers in all communities

Long-term outcomes

- Decrease in spread of misinformation
- Increased trust in local government
- Maintained trust across communities
- Better communication between communities & LA/Public Health [consistency]
- Network collaborate and share challenges, create solutions and learn from each others
- Learning from experiences of CCs
- Sharing power to enable communities to ask questions, make choices to help them protect themselves/families
- More broadly, reduced barriers for groups/individuals from 'at risk' communities
- Continued work and engagement with communities (covid and other issues)
- Deeper sense of belonging [esp. in particular communities]

3.5 To evaluate, through assessing community trust and communication, whether the COVID-19 Community Champion scheme activities in the three local authority areas are transferable to other topics or communities.

Objectives
- To describe the activities delivered in three local authority area sites in terms of: what, when, where, duration, reach.
- To evaluate whether there is: increased trust across communities, increased community trust in local government, sustained work & engagement with communities, better communication between communities & LA/Public Health.
- To ascertain whether the activities can be linked to a change in vaccine status.

3.6 Project Plan - An exploratory study with a mixed-methods study design - quantitative analysis to understand the relationship between CCC activities and vaccine uptake across the 3 LAs; qualitative interviews with programme coordinators and community champions; and community surveys with selected communities (Sandwell and Walsall councils).

3.7   The evaluation findings showed that geographically, more areas in Sandwell and Walsall had more CCC activities than Birmingham. Under the four key themes: Barriers and facilitators to engaging with CCC activities, sustainability, trust and Distrust, transferability: effective communication and open dialogue, cooperative engagement, and funding for comprehensive training are essential for a successful CCC model. However, distrust due to vaccine concerns, historical research exploitation, government reputation and lack of response impacts trust. Findings from the community survey revealed that after the CCC activities, there was increased trust across communities (including family, religion, and faith leaders), national and local government and health professionals. CCC's collaborative model can be transferred to other public health projects, as addressing rumours/misbeliefs among ethnic communities is crucial.

3.8   Conclusion - A successful CCC programme is one which encourages trust amongst champions through supportive engagement and collaborative working with LAs, addresses barriers more specifically to language needs to make sure Public Health messages get delivered to diverse communities. To ensure the sustainability of the CCC programme there is a need for sustainable funding, systems that reward the champions and organisations, and ongoing learning. It is worth investing in data collection pre- and post- initiatives to facilitate effective evaluations.

3.9   Based on the findings of the evaluation, which included interviews and surveys from local community groups and CCC coordinators, it is recommended that we:
   1.   Build a community of trusted champions to support public health messaging.
   2.   Work collaboratively with community champions and voluntary organisations, ensuring clear guidance and expectations of the role of champions.
   3.   Allocate sufficient funding to facilitate regular meetings and communications with community champions to support collaborative working, community champion's training in communication styles and public engagement, learning, celebratory events, and rewards, to ensure a successful programme.

4. Support community champions connected to a range of local organisations, including voluntary sector organisations, community groups, and faith groups to host face-to-face community events, café days, and seminars to deliver public health messages to their networks, community groups, and organisations.

5. Expand the role of COVID community champions to encompass a broader spectrum of public health initiatives, including promoting healthy eating, managing alcohol consumption, and encouraging physical activity.

4   Engagement

4.1   During the period of April to June 2023, three researchers from the evaluation team conducted online interviews with ten COVID-19 community champions coordinators (4 from Sandwell Council) and five COVID-19 community champions (3 from organisations in Sandwell) across the three Local Authorities.

4.2   Onsite community surveys were conducted in Walsall (ASDA superstore) and Smethwick, in Sandwell (Gurunanak Gurudwara) in July 2023. A total of 221 valid responses were gathered.

4.3   An evaluation postcard containing a summary of the evaluation have been translated in four languages (English, Hindi, Polish and Punjabi) and shared with Sandwell HDRC, the other LAs involved in the evaluation (Birmingham City Council and Walsall Council), and the data collections sites (ASDA and the Gurdwara).

4.4   The PHIRST Fusion also engaged and carried out two case studies with Covid-19 community champions.

5   Implications

| Resources: | Findings from the evaluation suggested that champions need ongoing learning that focuses on crucial messages to deliver to their communities. Adequate funding and rewards are critical for sustaining COVID-19 community champions. The financial implication of this is that there is a need to allocate sufficient funding to facilitate regular meetings, communications with community champions, training in communication styles and public engagement, learning, celebratory events, and a rewards system. |

	There is also evidence that the COVID-19 community champions programme may be effective in increasing vaccination uptake. However, more data is required to evaluate the impact more robustly. This implies that Local Authorities should invest in locally collected data to facilitate the evaluation of services to understand their impact on community health.
Legal and Governance:	Evidence from the evaluation indicated that lack of trust due to historical medical research exploitation, the government's social care reputation and organisational issues impact the success of the champion's programme. The implication of this is that there is a need for continuous improvement in policy/regulations, transparency, and communication, to monitor research activities, including those involving the health and wellbeing of communities.
Risk:	There are no risk implications, including any mitigating measures planned/taken, health and safety, or insurance implications.
Equality:	Evidence from the evaluation indicated that language disparities and distrust among the champions hinder engagement. The implication of this is that there is a need for an equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) improvement plan, which aligns with the vision of Local authorities. Ensuring that people from diverse communities can work in a safe environment where they can raise concerns freely, are listened to, feel involved, ask questions and admit mistakes without fear.
Health and Wellbeing:	There is evidence that COVID-19 community champion activities may be effective in increasing the uptake of vaccines. The evaluation also emphasised the transferability to diverse communities, public health initiatives and topics. The implication of this is that the COVID-19 community champion model can be transferred to other spectrum of public health initiatives, including promoting healthy eating, managing alcohol consumption, and encouraging physical activity.
Social Value:	The lack of trust due to vaccine concerns, historical medical research exploitation and government's social care reputation and organisational issues suggested the need to engage with diverse communities. The need to address barriers more specifically to language needs to make sure Public Health messages get delivered to diverse communities implies that there is a need for local authorities to engage and collaborate with champions from underserved and ethnic minority communities, including

	people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. This approach could facilitate positive cultural and behavioural change across diverse communities and groups.
Climate Change:	There are no direct implications for climate change outcomes and any potential impact on the environment. However, the evaluation findings are transferable to a range of initiatives that could include those relating to air quality and climate change.
Corporate Parenting:	There are no implications for Corporate Parenting responsibilities

6   Appendices

Appendix One - Presentation.

7.   Background Papers

[An evaluation of three West Midlands local authority COVID-19 Community Champions programmes delivered in support of the national vaccination effort](#)