

# Community health champions: creating new relationships with patients and communities

## Key points

- Altogether Better has developed an award-winning, evidence-based approach to engaging communities called community health champions.
- More than 17,000 volunteer community health champions are supporting more than 105,000 people in their communities and workplaces.
- The approach can give a positive return on investment of up to £112.42 for every £1 invested (York Health Economics Consortium).
- Evidence shows an increase in confidence, self-esteem and self-belief, improvements in physical and mental health and lifestyle, and increased awareness and knowledge of health issues (Leeds Metropolitan University).

continued overleaf

Imagine two identical health programmes serving deprived areas. Both are hitting their outcome targets, but one is doing a lot more. Somehow, its service users are not just in better health, they are also happier and more confident. A small but significant number who were unemployed have found jobs, in some cases taking whole families off benefits. These families are eating better and taking more exercise. Their children's attendance at school is better and their results are improving. It is obvious which approach is more satisfying for healthcare professionals and more attractive to cash strapped funders. Altogether Better's evidence-based community health champion approach is delivering this social value.

Altogether Better has been working with a number of partners including the Department of Health to share learning about the community health champion model and increase the voice of patients and communities in shaping health and social care services. Working in partnership with the NHS Confederation, Altogether Better aims to develop a network of community health champions across England, support localities to replicate the values and principles of the community health champion model, and respond positively to some of the important questions and challenges which need to be addressed by health leaders, decision-makers and commissioners.

Building on four years' experience of recruiting, training and supporting more than 17,000 volunteer community health champions, it is Altogether Better's ambition to continue to work to create social value by unlocking the assets and resources of individuals and communities to create healthier communities and better quality health services.



## Key points

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- The approach supports the appropriate use of services, including reducing barriers to access, decreasing hospital admissions, and improving health status, including improved disease management where the focus is on long-term conditions.
- The approach works across communities to improve health outcomes on a range of issues, including older people's health, diabetes and other long-term conditions, mental health and reducing obesity.
- The approach works in a range of settings, including GP practices, foundation trusts and communities.
- The community health champion model was highlighted as best practice in the Marmot Review and the Public Health White Paper.

social care organisations to design and deliver services that will improve the quality of care, health and wellbeing.

This is about people taking responsibility and acting for themselves to improve their own health and wellbeing and that of their friends and neighbours. It involves recognising that people would rather make a contribution and take control of their own health and wellbeing than have things done for them. The approach increases the voice of under-represented groups, increases volunteering and involvement in easily ignored neighbourhoods, creating a resource of volunteer health champions to work alongside the health and social care system to improve the health and wellbeing and transform the lives of people experiencing the poorest health.

**'Being a health champion has really helped me and my family. We are more outgoing and we do more activities together. We are healthier, fitter and happier'**  
 Altogether Better Community Health Champion, Sheffield

## Volunteering, social action and improved health outcomes

The Department of Health's Strategic Vision for Volunteering talks of the necessity to celebrate and strengthen the contribution of volunteers, stating that: "There is untapped potential in our communities that we cannot afford to ignore". It sets out a vision "to create a society where social action and reciprocity are the norm and where volunteering is encouraged, promoted and supported". The vision is of a society where individuals have greater choice and control and where services and support are patient led, personalised and

There is simply not enough resource in the current system to meet increasing health and social care needs. Traditionally funded public services are only a small part of what people need. What people value is participation and relationships that sustain their sense of dignity and control. Altogether Better is working to create new and meaningful relationships between patients and communities and health and

## Community health champions

Community health champions are individuals who are engaged, trained and supported to volunteer and use their life experience, understanding and position of influence to help their friends, families, neighbours, communities and work colleagues lead healthier lives. They are able to inspire and support others to make positive lifestyle changes and they also work with local service commissioners and providers to improve the quality of local health and social care services by contributing local intelligence, experience and knowledge of community skills and resources.



responsive to the needs of local people. "We are committed to placing more power in the hands of citizens and front-line staff and empowering them to take greater action. Volunteering and wider social action have a vital part to play in realising these ambitions."

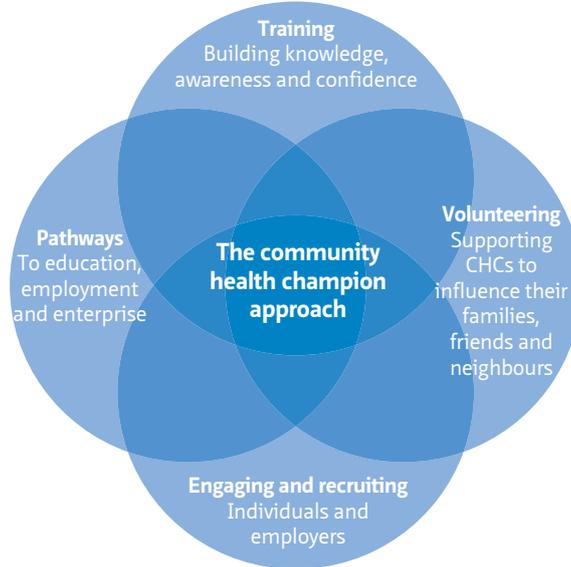
## Questions for leaders, decision-makers and commissioners

**Are there activities you could facilitate within your local community to involve local people in co-production of their own health, care and wellbeing?**

Altogether Better believe more can be achieved together than alone and more sustained impact is made when work is done 'with' rather than 'to' individuals or communities. Everyone has skills and life experience, local knowledge and unique qualities, gifts and insights which are assets and resource to create change. Evidence from our community health champions research and evaluation demonstrates that when individuals are encouraged and enabled to contribute their expertise, time and learning and feel valued and respected then positive changes are made and creative, cost-effective programmes can be co-produced.

**Are there activities within your organisation that could be undertaken by volunteers**

## The community health champion approach



### which would enhance the quality, experience or outcome of services, increase capacity or reduce future demand?

Altogether Better has tested a community health champion model in GP surgeries in Sheffield and Bradford which is demonstrating the benefits of implementing integrated approaches to healthcare. The evidence-based, co-produced model is enabling people to improve self-management of their diabetes and make positive behavior changes and the evidence suggests will lead to a reduction in inappropriate demand for services, a reduction in avoidable and costly emergency admissions, and a reduction in the rate and number of early onset diabetic complications. Dr Shahid Ali, a

Bradford-based GP and National Clinical Lead, Commissioning Intelligence, said: "The value of the diabetes project has been that patients develop a greater understanding of their condition and are more able to navigate the system, enabling them to look after themselves better."

**'GPs could do a terrific job for themselves and their patients by referring them to local health champion groups, such as walking groups for people with high blood pressure. They could prescribe it or advise their patients to go and do it'**  
Altogether Better Community Health Champion, Bradford



**Are there local volunteer-led groups or volunteer-involving organisations that you could be working with to improve the health and well-being of the local community and engage more people in co-creating health?**

Altogether Better and the NHS Confederation are developing a network of interested individuals and organisations in order to connect patients and communities with health service commissioners and providers. To join the network, visit our website at [www.altogetherbetter.org.uk](http://www.altogetherbetter.org.uk)

'As a disabled person, volunteering gives me a sense of purpose and focus to my day and improves my mental wellbeing by making me feel that I am of use and can still contribute to society'

Altogether Better Community Health Champion, Hull

**Are the voices of people from the local community, including those with health and care needs, families, carers and volunteers, being heard in the process of needs assessment?**

**Are these voices influencing priorities for the services you commission?**

Altogether Better believes that relationships matter. Change comes from shared understanding and finding common purpose. Investing time to get to know each other and finding people who can contribute on different levels to build effective and meaningful partnerships and social networks. Investing resource in the development of communities and sharing trust and respect are necessary to create equality of opportunity in health and wellbeing and for individuals to be partners in their own health. In Sheffield community health champions have been researching influences on health and happiness and mapping assets of communities that contribute to health and well-being. Their expertise and local knowledge have been central to the design and delivery of the work which aims to demonstrate the resource that community health champions have to co-produce plans for their local area and to shape future Joint Strategic Asset Assessments that include community voices and intelligence.

**Case study**

David is a community health champion with Fit Reds. Affiliated to Barnsley FC, Fit Reds draws on men's passion for football to tackle major health issues including drug use, obesity, drinking, smoking and prostate cancer. In his role as health champion, David has encouraged over 80 men to improve their health, helping them to lose a total of 205.6kg in weight. He has signposted and supported 17 individuals to access services to address issues around physical activity, substance misuse, smoking and mental wellbeing.

"The problem with men is that they put up with things," he said. "They're often too proud to go and see their doctor. The idea with Fit Reds is to catch problems at an early stage. "Although I am not clinically trained as a community health champion, I have skills that allow people to see me as someone they can talk to. I try to make them feel that they are not alone, especially when talking about sensitive health problems, like prostate cancer and mental health. A lot of lads ignore their problems and I try to get them to address them and overcome them."

David has carried out 67 NHS Life Checks in his community and improved his own health and wellbeing after 15 years of recurring health problems. He has now enrolled on a football coaching course with the aim of returning to full time employment.

David's story can be read in full at [www.altogetherbetter.org.uk](http://www.altogetherbetter.org.uk)



**Are there services that you are responsible for commissioning in which people with health and care needs, volunteers and members of the community could play a greater part?**

Evidence shows that where investment, support and training are provided, individuals in communities are able to transform their own health and create sustained activity to positively influence others. This capacity building approach is essential for communities to be more than recipients of health and social care services and to feel empowered and enabled to create change and improved health and life outcomes.

**“The community health champion role can be a catalyst for change for both individuals and communities. Indeed, community health champions have the potential to be instrumental in creating a cultural shift in communities towards healthier and more integrated living. These findings chime with current discussion around the need to build a society where people take a more active part and engage more with service development and delivery.”**

*South 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*

**‘I think the most important skill is just being able to get on with people – communication in a way that engages people without being patronising or preaching. You’re just seen as one of the community, so you can get close to people in a way that many professionals will never be able to’**

Community health champion

**‘As a health champion I have lost three stone and reduced my blood pressure. I help out at Zumba and Boxercise classes to get more men like me fitter, and my wife and daughter are training to be champions too. If anyone had said to me before February 2011 what I’d be doing now I wouldn’t have believed them. I feel fantastic and better about myself!’**

Steven Johnstone, community health champion, Sheffield

**Success through engagement**

Evidence shows that meaningful engagement with patients, carers, volunteers and communities achieves:

- better health and wellbeing:
  - improved self-management of long-term conditions
  - healthier lifestyles and behaviours

- improved mental health
- reduced isolation and loneliness
- better quality services:
  - more intelligent commissioning
  - better quality, more accessible and appropriate services
  - reduced hospital admissions, readmissions and delayed discharge
- more active citizens:
  - more confident patients with greater ownership of health
  - better reach and connections with disadvantaged communities
  - increased active citizenship and volunteers in health
  - better knowledge about the needs and assets in communities.

Altogether Better is continuing to build evidence of using this approach in supporting long-term condition management, older people, parenting and birth, relationship support, mental wellbeing and physical health and activity.

**To learn more about the evidence and application of this work or to explore areas to work in partnership, contact Altogether Better at [altogether.better@swyt.nhs.uk](mailto:altogether.better@swyt.nhs.uk)**



## The NHS Confederation

The NHS Confederation represents all organisations that commission and provide NHS services. It is the only membership body to bring together and speak on behalf of the whole of the NHS.

We help the NHS to guarantee high standards of care for patients and best value for taxpayers by representing our members and working together with our health and social care partners.

We make sense of the whole health system, influence health policy and deliver industry-wide support functions for the NHS.

## Altogether Better

Our aim is to work together to activate the full potential of community health champions to improve the health and well being of their communities. We do this by:

- strengthening the voice of community health champions
- co-producing solutions which support health and wellbeing
- growing a transformational network
- influencing policy and practice.
- For more information visit [www.altogetherbetter.org.uk](http://www.altogetherbetter.org.uk)