



LEEDS COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS: EVALUATION AND LEARNING - SUMMARY

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KEY MESSAGES

- A team from Leeds Beckett University has carried out an evaluation to understand how the programme worked and to identify how lessons learnt can be applied in the future. In total, 27 individuals, including Community Champions, were interviewed.
- Leeds Community Champions programme was set up during the COVID-19 pandemic to engage better with diverse communities and reduce health inequalities. The programme has since evolved to have a broader health and wellbeing focus, but still working with communities that have the highest health needs.
- During the pandemic, having Community Champions as trusted messengers, able to connect with others and have informal conversations, helped break down barriers between services and communities. The volunteers and the many voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations involved in outreach activities brought flexible, additional capacity that made a difference on the ground. By Feb 2023, over 240 people had been recruited as Community Champions bringing cultural knowledge and connections.
- Community Champions were an important part of the pandemic response in Leeds, including supporting vaccination uptake. Impacts from the programme include better community insight, stronger connections, increased trust, improved outreach, plus benefits for the Community Champions in terms of gaining knowledge, confidence, and fulfilment.



- Strong partnership working, between Leeds City Council (Safer Stronger Communities and Public Health), VCSE organisations and other partners has been the foundation for the programme. Cross-sector collaboration has worked at a city level and in the delivery of events and activities in neighbourhoods. Over 80 local organisations, including grassroots groups, have been involved.
- There has been much learning about how to develop a Community Champions programme, how to overcome barriers to accessing services and how to build a flexible, inclusive volunteering approach that supports the involvement of people from diverse backgrounds.
- Findings from the Leeds evaluation confirm other research on Community Champion approaches. This is a practical way to improve connections between communities and prevention services and build community capacity.
- Going forward, recommendations from the evaluation - on inclusive volunteering, on utilising the commitment and knowledge of Community Champions, on co-design and co-delivery - can be used to shape future action on health inequalities and help strengthen volunteering in the city.

£121,870 in grants funds distributed to community organisations



RESEARCH AIMS AND MAIN FINDINGS

This research has captured learning from the Leeds Community Champions programme and appraised options for embedding a sustainable Champion model in Leeds that builds community capacity and contributes to reducing health inequalities.

Specific evaluation questions were:

Q1: How has the Leeds Community Champion programme evolved and what worked (or has not worked) in building the programme?

Q2: What contribution did the programme make and for whom? Has it helped reduce health inequalities and build community capacity?

Q3: What needs to be taken forward in embedding the programme, incorporating key learning and linked to the new Leeds volunteering strategy?

The Leeds Community Champions programme has been effective at engaging with, and reaching into, diverse communities at risk of experiencing significant health inequalities. In neighbourhoods and communities, Community Champions became those trusted messengers, able to have informal conversations and connect with others. Community Champions also provided flexible additional capacity to support and complement local organisations and projects. A strong partnership approach between statutory services and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations at all levels has been a major factor in the success of the programme.

Overall, this flexible, responsive approach has helped services reach some of those communities with the greatest needs. Going forward, learning from the programme - on inclusive volunteering, on utilising the commitment and knowledge of Community Champions, on co-design and co-delivery - can be used to shape future action on health inequalities and help strengthen volunteering in the city.

BACKGROUND

In 2021, a Community Champions programme was established in Leeds to engage more effectively with diverse local communities on COVID-19 response and recovery messages, to build trust in formal health services among communities, and to complement and support other pandemic-related activities. The programme involved new partnerships, mobilisation of volunteers (Community Champions) and a small grants scheme for local groups and organisations to develop outreach activities. Management and administration was shared between Leeds City Council (Safer Stronger Communities and Public Health), Voluntary Action Leeds (VAL), and Forum Central, with Hamara as part of the delivery partnership in the first round.

Funding was initially provided by the Department of Health and Social Care and then the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities.

“The vaccination bus, it was a door knocking success. We would have never vaccinated that number of people without champions going out, chatting to people in the street, going into the barbers, going into the local shops and then talking to people in the language they understand.”

KEY INFORMANT

“You can spend thousands and millions on, you know, just printing out things and giving them to people. But nobody's gonna have a look and they'll just go straight in the bin. But you have one meaningful conversation and that lingers. And then that next person will end up saying it to somebody else.”

COMMUNITY CHAMPION

WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS?

Community Champions (also known as health champions) are community members who volunteer to promote health and wellbeing or improve conditions in their local community. Champions use their social networks and life experience to address barriers to engagement and improve connections between services and disadvantaged communities.

A community champion approach is about tapping into the skills, knowledge and commitment of community members to reduce health inequalities and promote better health and wellbeing. The approach is endorsed by National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidance on Community Engagement and is recognised within Public Health England's family of community-centred approaches. There is growing evidence from across the UK about the positive contribution of Community Champions in the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The messenger is as important as the message. And that, in essence, is what Champions are doing. They're changing the face of the messenger. So, it's not a service with a badge, its people talking about things that are important.”

KEY INFORMANT

“I think the Community Champions managed to get to the people we would normally not get to and because they looked and spoke like local residents, they were kind of trusted.”

KEY INFORMANT

194



Community
Champions
volunteers

RESULTS

How has the Leeds Community Champion programme evolved and what worked (or has not worked) in building the programme?

The Community Champions programme was established as part of Leeds COVID-19 response and benefitted from partner organisations' willingness to collaborate in support of a newfound shared priority and from more people being able to volunteer. Over time the programme has evolved with the changing public health landscape to have a broader health and wellbeing focus. During the pandemic, Community Champions provided a link, and started to build trust between communities and services – initially about COVID-19 and now more broadly. This was complemented by a small grants scheme enabling local organisations and groups to develop outreach activities and events in their communities. Community Champions spread public health messages through informal community networks in an accessible way. The programme has also shown the value of having a pool of volunteers that are prepared to be quickly deployed into a diversity of public health settings.

In total, 176 engagement events were held in community settings, vaccination clinics and online events and Community Champions engaged in over 5000 conversations including face-to-face interactions.

“But there's only about seven [families]. And so you get one family, you've got all seven. You know, this kind of thing.”

KEY INFORMANT



There has been much learning about how to develop a Community Champions programme. Several interconnected factors that have influenced the success:

- Flexible roles are attractive to volunteers but can be challenging to manage into delivery for organisations not used to involving volunteers.
- Volunteers can bring diverse knowledge and experience that can support their Community Champions roles but may lack role-specific knowledge for some assignments. During the pandemic, Community Champions were sometimes faced with potentially challenging conversations in communities.
- Providing training was essential but this needs to be balanced with volunteers' varied time commitments.
- The diversity of Community Champions was invaluable for engaging diverse communities. The informal approach used by Community Champions helps build trust and relationships.
- Effective volunteer coordinators have been invaluable. This helps in delivering a flexible programme across different settings.
- Cross sector working has underpinned the initiation and subsequent delivery of the programme.

What contribution did/does the programme make and for whom?

Community Champions made positive contributions to a range of different groups and organisations, including volunteers themselves, community members, and local organisations and services. Generally, Community Champions have made a positive contribution to the public health landscape in Leeds.

Individual Community Champions have benefited in terms of increased employability, gaining interpersonal skills and confidence, and a sense of enjoyment and fulfilment from the role.

“The Community Champions gave us the flexibility to get people at very short notice...these Community Champions/volunteers, were already vetted, DBS checked, so would go through the council and would be given a particular place to volunteer from...it was very clear and well thought out, and it helped us a lot when it came to organising.”

KEY INFORMANT

For communities, Community Champions had positive impacts during the COVID-19 pandemic and after. They had a complementary role in the larger, system-wide pandemic response effort, such as doing community engagement to support vaccine pop-ups. Since the focus of the programme has evolved beyond COVID-19, Community Champions have continued to make a positive contribution to addressing health inequalities such as raising awareness in communities of local services, signposting to support, and being a friendly face to talk to during challenging times.

For public health-related organisations (including the local VCSE), Community Champions provided additional capacity for a myriad of organisations to continue delivering services. They provided ‘reach’ where statutory services had previously struggled to engage. The Community Champions programme has been effective at improving organisations’ understanding of the contribution that volunteers can make in a health and wellbeing context and what is needed to effectively involve and support volunteers. The programme has also contributed to building greater inter-organisational and inter-sector connections in Leeds. Over 80 local organisations have been involved, with many of these developing successful neighbourhood outreach activities through the small grants scheme.

176

Events attended by
Community Champions



What needs to be taken forward in embedding the programme, incorporating key learning and linked to the new Leeds volunteering strategy?

There is a lot of support for Community Champions to continue in Leeds. The programme has been associated with a more collaborative way of working, which if continued, would be beneficial to the Leeds public health system. The clear focus of Community Champions during COVID-19 was a strength that has been at risk of being lost as the programme has evolved a broader health and wellbeing scope. An agreed revised focus will help maintain the effectiveness of the programme.

Community Champions could continue to provide a mechanism to gather intelligence about community need. Maintaining an established pool of volunteers that are prepared to be deployed quickly in response to community need is particularly valued. That Community Champions provide a complementary role to public health professionals – not a cheaper replacement – needs to be remembered.

Moving forward, the programme should continue to accommodate the needs of volunteers. Making the ‘volunteer journey’ more inclusive should support engagement with diverse communities. The Leeds Community Champions programme is an exemplar of how to build inclusive volunteering.

“I knew she was very happy inside, having been able to speak to someone. So, in that sense of someone caring, looking out at knowing what you are going through...some are lonely without people to speak to, so it means to speak to someone, the Community Champions provide that platform.”

COMMUNITY CHAMPION

5079



Conversations between Community Champions and community members

Languages spoken by Community Champions

37



“From again what I've seen, it drew a lot of diverse volunteers into it. There was a lot of representation from various backgrounds. And even now when I do go volunteering, I find that still and that's been quite nice going into different communities, different areas.”

COMMUNITY CHAMPION



RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic planning and commissioning

- There is a strong case for ongoing investment in this innovative programme to build organisational and community capacity to address health inequalities and strengthen connections to diverse communities.
- Consideration should be given to including a Community Champion approach in emergency planning.
- A Champion approach can build on the close partnership working at a city and local level that developed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Leeds. Maintaining working relationships, including between VCSE and statutory services, could be a vital part of delivering change as Leeds becomes a Marmot city.

Programme development and delivery

Future programme delivery should be based on four key principles:

- Clarity of purpose based on the special contribution of Community Champions to support community engagement activities.
- A consistent focus – so everyone knows what the Champion offer is and how they can contribute.
- Inclusive volunteering – valuing what people bring whatever their social circumstances and supporting them on their volunteer journey.
- Excellent volunteer coordination on the ground.

Research

- The programme needs a robust monitoring system to collect the most relevant data on recruitment, engagement and (where possible) impacts.
- Further qualitative research to gather the perspectives of Community Champions and the communities where they volunteer.
- There is potential to develop a shared evaluation framework between delivery partners to allow ongoing evaluation of the champions programme.

HOW WE DID THE RESEARCH

The evaluation was conducted by a team from the Centre for Health Promotion research, Leeds Beckett University. This report is based on interviews and focus groups with nine Community Champions and eighteen key informants from VCSE, local authority and the NHS. Available secondary data sources were also analysed, mainly different sorts of monitoring data that had been collected between 2021 and 2023.

Suggested citation:

South, J. & Southby, K. (2023) Leeds Community Champions: Evaluation & Learning: Summary. Leeds, Voluntary Action Leeds, Forum Central, Leeds City Council.

“I think funding community health organisations was a massive, massive positive for the project because entrusting those grassroots organisations, in those particular communities, to deliver in the way they know best, [...] so I think that needs to continue.”

KEY INFORMANT





PARTNERS

