

Health Together – developing an assets-based approach to health and wellbeing in Walsall

Early in 2013 Mark Gamsu and Judy White worked with Susi Miller from the Federation of Community Development Learning to facilitate a programme to develop a whole systems approach to asset-based working in Walsall. This work was commissioned the Local Government Association who between April 2012 and March 2013, worked in collaboration with the NHS Leadership Academy to provide bespoke support to more than 60 health and wellbeing boards (HWBs).

The nature of the support was customised to meet the specific needs of each individual board and included: leadership and organisational development; supporting HWBs with setting priorities for the joint health and wellbeing strategy; facilitating stakeholder engagement workshops and individual board simulation events.

HWBs in receipt of bespoke support were invited to produce a case study, summarising their journey and drawing out lessons and learning for other boards and the wider sectors. The eight case studies can be found on the LGA website here:

http://www.local.gov.uk/web/quest/health//journal_content/56/10180/3931606/ARTICLE

The case studies highlight some of the challenges faced and how boards are addressing these, for example:

- establishing HWBs in complex two-tier areas
- promoting effective community engagement and co-creation of health and wellbeing
- setting clear priorities.

The work Health Together undertook in Walsall in collaboration with the Federation of Community Development Learning, was one of the case studies and is reproduced below.

A whole systems approach to asset-based working in Walsall: a case study

In 2012, Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council, through its Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB), created a short development programme. It was intended to bring a greater focus and coherence to the work being undertaken across the borough to improve health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities. The programme was designed to:

- achieve support for the development of a system level approach to tackling health inequalities and improving health and wellbeing outcomes
- re-balance practice in Walsall to place a stronger emphasis on working in partnership with the public through an asset-based approach alongside borough-level activities.

The programme of activities had the following three elements:

- Health and wellbeing board workshop – to achieve a shared understanding of the issues and scale of the challenge and to agree on the approach to be taken
- Senior leaders – a half-day workshop involving leaders from all main sectors in the borough designed to gain ownership and buy-in to the proposed approach
- Area partnerships – two-hour workshops for local residents and practitioners in each of the borough's six area partnerships.

Next steps

The area partnership workshops were an important step in the process of developing a whole-system focus to address health inequalities and improve health and wellbeing outcomes in Walsall through an assets approach. They provided a platform for a debate about public health priorities and actions to address these, and they energised and engaged partnership members. However, each workshop lasted only two hours and this did not allow sufficient time to agree clear priorities and actions.

While there was a real interest in asset-based approaches, the degree of understanding among participants varied and no clear ideas about how to embed asset-based working (aside from producing directories of resources) emerged directly from the workshop. It is crucial to recognise that developing asset-based approaches is not a 'quick fix'.

The Walsall Area Partnership team and the Public Health team are considering the next steps. Each area partnership is now identifying specific local priorities in order to put appropriate action plans in place that could be addressed through an asset based approach. In addition to this they are considering:

- Establishing peer learning networks which would include partners from across sectors and communities to strengthen capability and bring in local challenge to develop more substantial programmes of asset-based working
- How intelligence systems could be developed to better capture wider sources of quantitative and qualitative data to achieve a more holistic view of the social determinants of health and the contribution of key sectors such as the voluntary and community sector.

Key lessons for other health and wellbeing boards

- There is a real potential and appetite among wider stakeholders to work together to improve health and wellbeing by adopting a whole-system approach to asset based working.
- Local structures such as area partnerships have much to offer and can help develop a more 'bottom up' approach that is sensitive to neighbourhood needs.
- Senior leadership, particularly from politicians, is essential to set the tone and mandate action.
- More attention needs to be given to improving needs analysis so that it presents a more coherent view of wellbeing.
- Asset based approaches require a long-term commitment to shared learning between the public, paid staff and local leaders.