PHIRST Conversation: Ali Al-Osaimi

Ali Al-Osaimi

Public Health Portfolio Manager at Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council and Imam in his local Islamic community

PHIRST Fusion completed an evaluation (December 2023) of the Covid Community Champions approach in the West Midlands. Ali shares his experiences as a Community Champion and Faith and Community Engagement Lead and the evaluation of the scheme.

Tell us about the Community Champions programme and how you got involved

At the start of the pandemic Sandwell Council acknowledged that public health messages needed to be far reaching. Ali recognised that he and others could facilitate this:

"There was a lot of messages that needed to go out and in different Community languages... We've got an Imam in our team - let's utilise his skills."

Sandwell Council also recognised that the Faith and Community Sectors were hidden assets:

"During the pandemic everyone was just trying to figure out what to do and the Faith Sector in particular was one of those sectors that we hadn't really utilised much - We only realised it existed during the pandemic"

Ali spoke about his role as a Champion and spreading credible messages about the virus and vaccines. He helped to create standardised presentations which could be shared in different languages:

"If there's something that we need to say to the Community, we got the Faith Leaders to speak in their own language."

Ali shared public health messages in different languages by community leaders on his Healthy Sandwell YouTube channel

"It's just what tools you use and the right people to get their messages out to it"

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Watch some example videos on the Healthy Sandwell YouTube channel
http://tinyurl.com/2357p9n9

How did you identify the right people to get the messages into communities?

It was important to have different groups and communities represented

"what works for one particular group might not work all the time with other groups"

One thing that was important was to choose those who were well regarded:

"Community leaders, people who are respected in their community...I think it's just really knowing and linking to the right people in local communities. It's people that people listen to, respect"

Ali reflected that this does not have to be people who are perceived as traditional leaders but highlighted the importance of thinking broadly:

"Really understanding what leadership means. It's not always our traditional leadership that we think of previously – it could be someone completely different."

Many community leaders had large social media followings which were utilised during the pandemic.

"It doesn't have to be a Faith Leader, it could be... an artist... an athletic person or sports person ... population level kind of influence"

NIHR | Public Health Intervention Responsive Studies Teams

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How did you engage the Faith and Community Sector leaders?

As well as being a Community Champion, Ali also carried out Faith Sector engagement work during the pandemic:

"I would come like looking at the wider issues of engagement with the Community Faith Sector and see how they can be more active."

> "There's a high degree of trust and I think it helps when you've stayed for 24 years... people relate to you more as an individual than to the organisation"

He was able to facilitate this due to existing relationships with other faith and community leaders:

"There's a high degree of trust and I think it helps when you've stayed for 24 years... people relate to you more as an individual than to the organisation"

He supported their engagement through showing how he engaged as a faith leader himself:

"I modelled some of the stuff to other faith leaders as well. You know, being a public health practitioner myself, that helped it a lot."

Ali told us they ensured that briefings with Faith Leaders did not clash with prayer times, for example, to gain the respect of the leaders:

"it's about respect, inclusivity... these people really understand... they're not putting the meeting at a time when I should be at Friday prayer"

What is happening post-pandemic with regards to Faith and Community Sector Engagement?

As part of continuing to value community assets, key individuals across the Faith and Community sectors were invited to be part of the Faith Sector Board, which feeds into the Health and Wellbeing Board. They also have a full-time Faith Sector worker supporting around 200 Faith Sector organisations now.

"that really strong Faith Sector - it's got huge potential!... I think it is building on the strength of some communities in our area... they're already doing fantastic work, so just about linking with those organisations and if we can support their work... If you establish some kind of stable relationship and partnership working with the organisation"

What about the Community Champions programme now Covid is over?

At the end of the Covid Community Champion programme Sandwell Council brought together those who had played a part in the programme at a big event where they presented certificates, and thanked them for their contribution.

"To get that trust we just made sure that everyone is valued for their contribution"

Ali is interested if the Community Champions approach is relevant to other public health issues, one important point to consider was the nature of the pandemic:

"the pandemic was the main focus and that was just one single issue and it was easier... it really focussed people's attention"

There is also a need to consider the time and resource needed around Community Champions programmes and a need to be realistic that

"it might work in some areas really well... other areas may not be working well."

Ali considered whether a Public Health Community Champion role, covering a variety of issues rather than a single one, could work well. He shared his experience of working as a Lay Health Champion back in 2000.

"like a public health advocate"

This was what inspired him to work in public health and found himself many years later leading a Community Champion approach and working with Community and Faith Sectors. Ali finished by saying:

"It's how you utilise a community... it's a lot of resource that you can work with... with respect to all faiths and creed and views. Knowledge is key to that and the outcome can be good for everyone involved"

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