PHIRST Case Study: Deska Howe

Deska Howe

Health & Wellbeing Divisional Manager at West Bromwich African Caribbean Resource Centre https://www.wbacrc.org.uk/

PHIRST Fusion completed an evaluation (December 2023) of the Covid community champions approach in the West Midlands. Deska led the Covid Community Champions project for his community and provides his perspective on the report and recommendations.

Why were community champions needed in the pandemic?

The covid-19 pandemic exposed the health inequalities faced by minoritized communities in the pandemic. As Deska set out, there were disparities in the numbers of infections and deaths:

"There's been a very clear link to the the infection rate and the death rate and the link to health inequalities and deprived communities"

There were also differences in vaccination rates, with greater vaccine hesitancy among some groups, including the African Caribbean community that Deska's organisation serves.

"This is what people are saying around, you know if you have the vaccine just you know it's gonna make you sterile. It's not obviously not true."

> **Everybody knows what the issues are within the health inequality agenda... They know which communities the most disadvantaged they know, which communities have been exacerbated by, you know, the health and equality been exacerbated by the covid pandemic...**

What role did community champions play in the pandemic?

The community champions programme led by the Black-led organisation which Deska represents, balanced providing accurate information with individual choice around vaccination:

"We didn't say you've got to have the vaccine. What we said was that this is the information. This is what we believe is true."

Deska considered it an important step to get vaccinated and shared this information with individuals in the community:

"I took the vaccine and I've actually let people know that I'd actually taken the vaccine... they could see that, you know, somebody had the vaccine and, you know, they were still fit and healthy."

> **We worked in partnership with a range of other African Caribbean groups and community groups and churches and to basically give people the facts as much as we knew... somebody that looks like them, they talk like them. And it was a lot easier to get the message in across.**

Deska reflected that conversations around the vaccine were easy with individuals who they had already interacted with the organisation, because they had trust in the organisation:

"we had that relationship, you know, over many, many, many years and we built up that kind of trust"

Deska's organisation extended their reach beyond their own communities, through partnership working with other community organisations:

"we worked in partnership with a range of other African Caribbean groups and community groups and churches and to basically give people the facts as much as we knew"

It was felt that these were more challenging conversations without an existing relationship, but that they were able to quickly build trust:

"somebody that looks like them, they talk like them. And it was a lot easier to get the message in across."

NIHR | Public Health Intervention Responsive Studies Teams

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What value can community champions bring post-pandemic?

Inequity remains a priority post-pandemic, with inequalities across health and social care. Deska highlighted in our conversation for example that the African Caribbean community experiences disparities in conditions including diabetes, breast and prostate cancer, and during pregnancy. There could therefore be value in transferring the community champion model to other areas making outcomes more equitable. Using trusted community relationships to improve lives.

Recognising that the health and care system has limited resources, Deska asked local areas to carefully consider how they could best use what they have by using it where it is needed most:

"There might be shortage of money. So that means actually have to be really wise about how you do spend the money that you have and think where is the inequity... Where can we make the biggest impact? Who do we need to work with?"

Deska felt that it was important to invest money in community organisations **"that have got the trust of those communities"** to enable the voices of communities to be included in decision-making:

"How can we integrate them into our service redesign process?"

As well as investment, Deska raised the issue of trust this time between the health and care system and community organisations. Deska felt strongly that it was important for the system to recognise the work of the voluntary organisations – sending a message that their work was valued and building trust.

"That's a change of power...it's a change in mentality. It's a change in approach, and fundamentally it's a change in commissioning."

Deska asked the Local Authorities to make a pledge to act on the recommendations from our report them and to invest in their communities:

"Unless you start to invest in these communities to make them robust, to make them resilient when the next pandemic comes, who are you going to turn to?"

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What can Local Government and the Health Care System do differently?

- Build a community of trusted champions to support public health messaging
- Regularly meet and communicate with community champions to support collaborative working and the frequency of these should be agreed by both parties
- Work collaboratively with community champions and voluntary organisations, ensuring
- clear guidance and expectations
- Invest in training in communication styles and public engagement for champions
- Value and acknowledge the work of champions, for example, through celebratory events, awards, and certificates
- Support champions to host face-to-face community events, café days, and seminars to deliver public health messages to their networks
- Consider expanding the community champion model to a broader spectrum of public health initiatives