Evaluation of the Covid Community Champions programme in three West Midlands local authorities- findings from the Phase 2 qualitative study

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BACKGROUND

- Vaccine hesitancy was a major challenge to the UK government's efforts to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic
- Significant disparities in vaccine uptake: ethnic minority communities, deprived areas and lower socio-economic groups [1,2]
- The UK Government made substantial investment to support the Covid Community Champions programme

Who are Community Champions?

Community champions are community members who volunteer to promote health and wellbeing or improve conditions in their local community [3]

AIM

This NIHR funded (PHIRST) project aimed to evaluate the Covid Community Champions programme in three West Midlands local authorities (Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, Birmingham City Council, Walsall Council)

METHODS

The project had 3 phases:
Phase 1: Quantitative analysis to understand the relationship between Covid Community Champions programme activities and vaccine uptake across the 3 local authorities
Phase 2: Qualitative interviews with programme coordinators and community champions
Phase 3: Detailed community surveys with selected communities conducted within two of the three local authorities

The focus of this poster is the Phase 2 qualitative component

Phase 2 qualitative component aims:

1. Explore barriers and facilitators to programme engagement
2. Understand whether the programme increased trust across communities
3. Examine programme sustainability and transferability

Phase 2 qualitative component methods:

- Online interviews conducted with programme coordinators and community champions in the three West Midlands local authorities
- Ten coordinators and five Covid Community Champions across the three Local authorities were interviewed
- Interviews were conducted by three researchers between April-June 2023
- Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews

RESULTS

1. Barriers and facilitators

- Barriers to engagement included language disparities
- Positive community networks and trusted sources were facilitators

'Vaccine Toolkit translated into many languages would have been a helpful move .... with lack of trust in the council or in the NHS' (**Coordinator**)

2. Trust

'It does because it's coming from a trusted voice isn't it? It's coming from a trusted voice so they do trust what we have to say. ' (**Champion**)

- Effective communication and open dialogue built trust
- Trust in voluntary organisations could be leveraged to boost vaccine trust
- Distrust stemmed from vaccine related concerns (e.g. side effects experienced by champions), historical exploitation of minority communities in research, local government's poor social care reputation, and lack of responsiveness from local MPs

3. Sustainability and transferability

- Ongoing training and more funding and reward for the champions were key in enhancing programme sustainability
- The collaborative champions model is potentially transferable to other public health topics (e.g. healthy eating, physical activity)
- Addressing rumours/misbeliefs among ethnic communities is crucial

'They are not supported by anybody...if it needs to work, they need better funding, more resources and continued attention' (**Coordinator**)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of project recommendations (Phase 1, 2, 3):

- Covid champions programme activities increased trust. Local authorities should build a community of trusted champions to promote the health and wellbeing of communities
- Sufficient funding should be allocated to support the champion's training, learning and rewards, to ensure a successful programme
- Extensive training in communication styles and public engagement are recommended for the champions
- It is beneficial to value and acknowledge the work of champions (e.g. celebratory events, awards, certificates)
- The role of Covid community champions could be expanded to encompass a broader spectrum of public health topics (e.g. diet, alcohol, physical activity)

CONCLUSIONS

Community champions programmes show great potential in influencing the health and wellbeing of communities. There is a need for local authorities to build a community of trusted champions to support public health messaging

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