



Public Health  
England

Protecting and improving the nation's health

# **Community-centred public health** **Taking a whole system approach**

Briefing of research findings

## About Public Health England

Public Health England exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities. We do this through world-leading science, research, knowledge and intelligence, advocacy, partnerships and the delivery of specialist public health services. We are an executive agency of the Department of Health and Social Care, and a distinct delivery organisation with operational autonomy. We provide government, local government, the NHS, Parliament, industry and the public with evidence-based professional, scientific and delivery expertise and support.

Public Health England  
Wellington House  
133-155 Waterloo Road  
London SE1 8UG  
Tel: 020 7654 8000  
[www.gov.uk/phe](http://www.gov.uk/phe)  
Twitter: [@PHE\\_uk](https://twitter.com/PHE_uk)  
Facebook: [www.facebook.com/PublicHealthEngland](https://www.facebook.com/PublicHealthEngland)

Prepared by: Jude Stansfield, Jane South and Tom Mapplethorpe  
For queries relating to this document, please contact: [healthycommunities@phe.gov.uk](mailto:healthycommunities@phe.gov.uk)



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# Introduction

To reduce widening and persistent health inequalities, a radical shift is needed to put communities at the heart of public health. Building healthy, resilient, connected and empowered communities is an important way of improving the health of the population<sup>1,2</sup>. Local public health leaders are in a strong position to scale up community-centred approaches across local systems. Effective place-based working across sectors and in partnership with communities can improve health outcomes and meet other local priorities<sup>3</sup>.

Public Health England's (PHE) Healthy Communities Team has conducted research into current evidence and practice. This briefing summarises the key elements, core values and principles that are needed to make a shift to whole system approaches to community-centred public health. It is intended for use by local authority, NHS and voluntary & community sector (VCS) decision makers, who can adopt these recommendations to:

- improve the effectiveness and sustainability of action to build healthy communities
- embed community-centred ways of working within whole systems action to improve population health

This work is part of PHE's recently published '**Place-Based Approaches to Reducing Health Inequalities**' (PBA), which requires action at community, civic and service levels<sup>3</sup>. It will also support those local places developing whole system approaches to address specific public health issues, such as obesity<sup>4</sup>.

## Why are community-centred approaches needed?

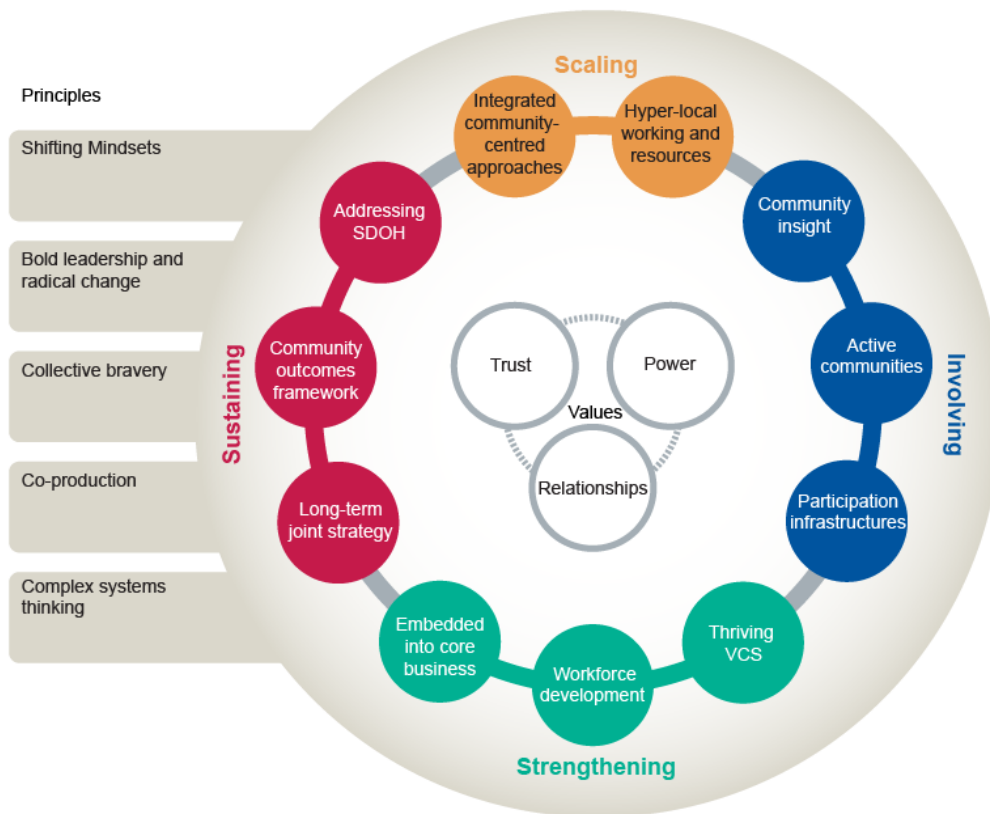
Community life, the places where people live, and having social connections and a voice in local decisions, are all factors that make a vital contribution to health and wellbeing and help buffer against disease<sup>5,6</sup>. Despite progress in supporting population health, health inequalities persist and the gap is widening<sup>3</sup>. Communities and populations that experience socioeconomic deprivation and/or marginalisation and powerlessness have worse health than those that are more affluent<sup>6,7</sup>.

Evidence supports the case for a shift to more person and community-centred approaches to health and wellbeing<sup>8,9</sup>. Actively involving citizens in prevention programmes and strengthening community assets is a key strategy in helping to improve the health of the poorest fastest<sup>3</sup>.

Community-centred approaches are increasingly used in public health practice to enhance individual and community capabilities, create healthier places and reduce health inequalities<sup>2</sup>. An edition of PHE's **Health Matters** on community-centred approaches for health and wellbeing summarises available guidance<sup>10</sup>. Next steps are around thinking about how to scale up these approaches across local health systems to achieve the best impact.

# Elements of a whole system approach to community-centred public health

Developing an integrated approach for community-centred public health requires a range of actions, from neighbourhood work to strategic leadership. Drawing on learning from local areas that are working in a whole system way, PHE has identified 11 key elements of change. These are underpinned by core values of power, trust and relationships. Recognising the different powers that citizens, professionals or elected representatives have and how they are used or shared requires building trust within and between communities and professionals, and fostering long-term collaborative relationships.



**Figure 1: Eleven elements of community-centred public health: a whole system approach (SDOH = social determinants of health).**

## Scaling

1. Scaled up community-centred prevention approaches, such as integrated wellness services, social prescribing and community development. Scale is about rolling out a flexible approach that works rather than applying a standard model everywhere.

2. Neighbourhood-based working at a 'hyper-local' level that taps into local resources.

### **Scaling in practice**

North Yorkshire re-designed their prevention service in partnership with the VCSE sector, social care and primary care. It is now a more holistic community-oriented service, linking prevention to social work and living well coordinators in GP practices.

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets' 'Communities Driving Change' initiative is whole system working at the neighbourhood level, working with 12 small neighbourhoods (estates) and their residents to improve the availability of 'good and better things', resulting in more community-oriented local services and better addressing social determinants of health.

### **Involving**

3. Community insight work to gather stories that provide meaning to data and solutions to problems. Participatory research, especially with those who are seldom heard, can provide better understanding of people's lives, public health needs and priorities.
4. Active communities supported by community capacity building approaches, e.g. community development, social action or community asset transfer
5. Participation structures, which are vital for engagement, joint decision-making and co-production, e.g. neighbourhood forums that bring agencies and community members together.

### **Involving in practice**

Dudley Council's community resilience journey started with gathering community stories for 6 months. This has shaped their whole system approach, including their strategic priorities and outcomes, social value measures and service commissioning frameworks.

Wellbeing Exeter is a robust partnership of public, voluntary and community sector organisations working together, managed by Devon Community Foundation. It aims to support people on a journey from dependence on services, to increased involvement and interdependence within better connected, inclusive and more resilient communities.

Get Oldham Growing is a community engagement programme focused on improving social connections and action on the social determinants of health. The aim is that 'growing hubs' in all 6 districts will be sustainable and community run, and this has already started through community interest companies and asset transfers.

## Strengthening

6. A thriving voluntary, community and social enterprise sector. Growth of local capacity can be achieved through valuing the contribution of the sector and supporting volunteering.
7. Workforce development to build core skills and knowledge in community-centred ways of working within all prevention programmes and public service reform.
8. Community-centred approaches used to meet all public health priorities, i.e. making it a mainstream way of working rather than a separate priority.

### Strengthening in practice

Small grass roots organisations in Bracknell Forest are given support to grow through seed funding, marketing and advice on diversity and inclusion. Public health staff have started working closely with community-led groups and doing community development in order to address social connectedness as an underlying cause of poor health.

Hull's whole system community-centred approaches grew from initial neighbourhood-based work on smoking cessation to being central to their whole public health approach, delivered through community-centred public health commissioning, strengthening of the VCS role and strategic alignment across the system, e.g. a refreshed city plan committed to addressing inequality by achieving fair, inclusive economic growth.

In Blackburn with Darwen, reductions in access to social support underpin widening health inequalities. Their approach was to build distributed leadership for public health across all council departments, sectors and organisations. This includes neighbourhood-based working and building a social movement approach to public support and social action for change.

## Sustaining

9. Strategic and long-term ambition for strengthening communities that is shared and communicated between agencies and communities.
10. Community outcome frameworks with short, medium and long-term indicators on what matters to communities, such as a sense of belonging, mental wellbeing and access to local activities.
11. Action to address the social determinants of health, such as housing, income, debt, employment, environment, crime & safety, as they directly impact on people's resilience and ability to participate.



### **Sustaining in practice**

A priority in East Sussex to develop a whole system approach to community resilience has led to partners working together on a 'personal and community resilience programme' with a number of shared objectives. Sustainability is being achieved through improving communities' capacity to come together to tackle local issues that matter to them most, supporting business to deliver social value and increasing knowledge of community centred ways of working.

Wirral is working to make everything more community-centred. Community connectors address the social determinants of health and residents are at the centre of work around the environment, licensing, housing conditions, environmental health and education, through a Wirral Together partnership. Efforts to improve the physical environments are happening at the same time as strengthening communities; "regeneration of place alongside regeneration of communities".

## Whole systems working

Whole systems working recognises that there is no one solution to tackle complex public health issues<sup>11</sup>. A coordinated, collaborative approach is needed, aligned to a 'health in all policies' approach<sup>12</sup>. PHE's work on a **whole system approach to obesity** provides a guide to support local areas with implementing their own approach, and includes system behaviours that underpin whole system working<sup>4</sup>.

### What is a whole systems approach?

"A local whole systems approach responds to complexity through an ongoing, dynamic and flexible way of working. It enables local stakeholders, including communities, to come together, share an understanding of the reality of the challenge, consider how the local system is operating and where there are the greatest opportunities for change. Stakeholders agree actions and decide as a network how to work together in an integrated way to bring about sustainable, long-term systems change". ([4] p17).

For community-centred public health, the 5 most important principles are:

- **bold leadership** to adapt radical approaches to reduce health inequalities
- **collective bravery** for risk-taking action and a strong partnership approach that works across sectors and gives attention to power and building trusting relationships with communities
- **co-production** of solutions with communities, based on new conversations with people about health and place
- **recognising the protective and risk factors** at a community level that affect people's health, and how these interact with wider determinants of health
- **shifting mindsets and redesigning the system**, aligned to building healthy, resilient, active and inclusive communities

### Embedding the core values in practice

Understanding power and empowerment is core to the Gateshead approach, as this is critical to reducing inequalities. Often, disadvantaged groups lack both a voice and confidence because they have been disempowered by the systems around them. Gateshead's approach is to support people in the knowledge that they have a voice and a right to be listened to. Professional practice is shifting to a bottom-up approach, working with communities through community development approaches and ensuring that the resulting public health activity is owned by communities.

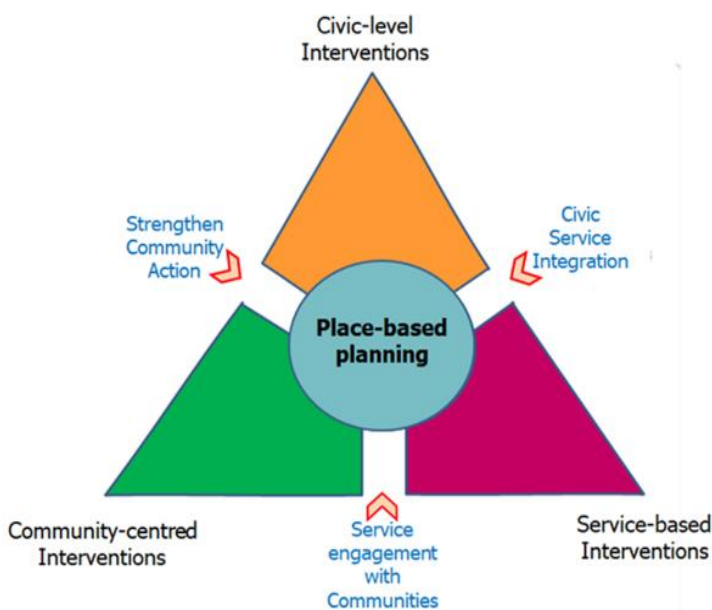
Several localities are working with Northumbria University on a model for 'commissioning for complexity'. This work recognises that "outcomes are created by people's interaction with whole systems, not by particular interventions and organisations"<sup>18</sup>, and that funders and commissioners should invest time in building positive, trusting relationships in order to build a healthy system that responds to complexity<sup>19</sup>.

## Where to start

Any local area, whatever their experience, has the potential to build a whole system approach to community-centred public health. Local leaders, who were interviewed as part of developing this framework, recommended some good starting points which were:

- undertaking insight work with communities, especially with those who are seldom heard – this helps provide a strong understanding of people’s health and wellbeing, as well as their priorities and solutions
- recognising and building on what is already going on, using methods such as local asset mapping
- strengthening local partnerships at a strategic level to build a shared vision
- producing a clear and compelling case for change linked to improving community health outcomes
- gaining senior buy-in and identifying champions to drive that change
- accepting that re-orienting how things are done is a messy, complex process that takes time and requires flexible approaches
- taking small steps and using small amounts of funding to get going and develop trusting relationships with communities

PHE recommends applying whole system approaches to community-centred public health as part of the guidance and tools on Place-Based Approaches for Reducing Health Inequalities. **Tool B – Civic Support to Communities** provides a diagnostic checklist to help areas work out how well they are enabling communities to take part.



**Figure 2: The Population Intervention Triangle (PIT)<sup>3</sup>**

Whole system community-centred approaches support NHS England's work to deliver a comprehensive model for **universal personalised care**. This includes building healthy and resilient communities to help keep the whole population healthy<sup>13</sup>. Taking a strategic, asset-based approach to empowering individuals and communities is also a key focus for improving social care outcomes<sup>14</sup>.

## Further resources

A set of slides on whole system approaches to community-centred public health is available on PHE’s [knowledge and libraries platform](#), together with a series of PHE practice examples that provide real life examples of how local areas have developed whole system community-centred approaches (as referenced in the ‘in practice’ sections above). There is also a list of other frameworks and tools that can support whole system working in partnership with communities. This includes PHE’s guidance on how to take a whole system approach to obesity or other public health issues<sup>4,15</sup>.

PHE has also published evidence on [community-centred approaches for health and wellbeing](#). Our healthy communities programme has supported implementation through local delivery support and capacity building, [NICE guidance and quality standards](#), [e-learning](#), [All Our Health resources](#) and a collection of community-centred [practice examples](#) (see Appendix 1 for more details on these and other resources).

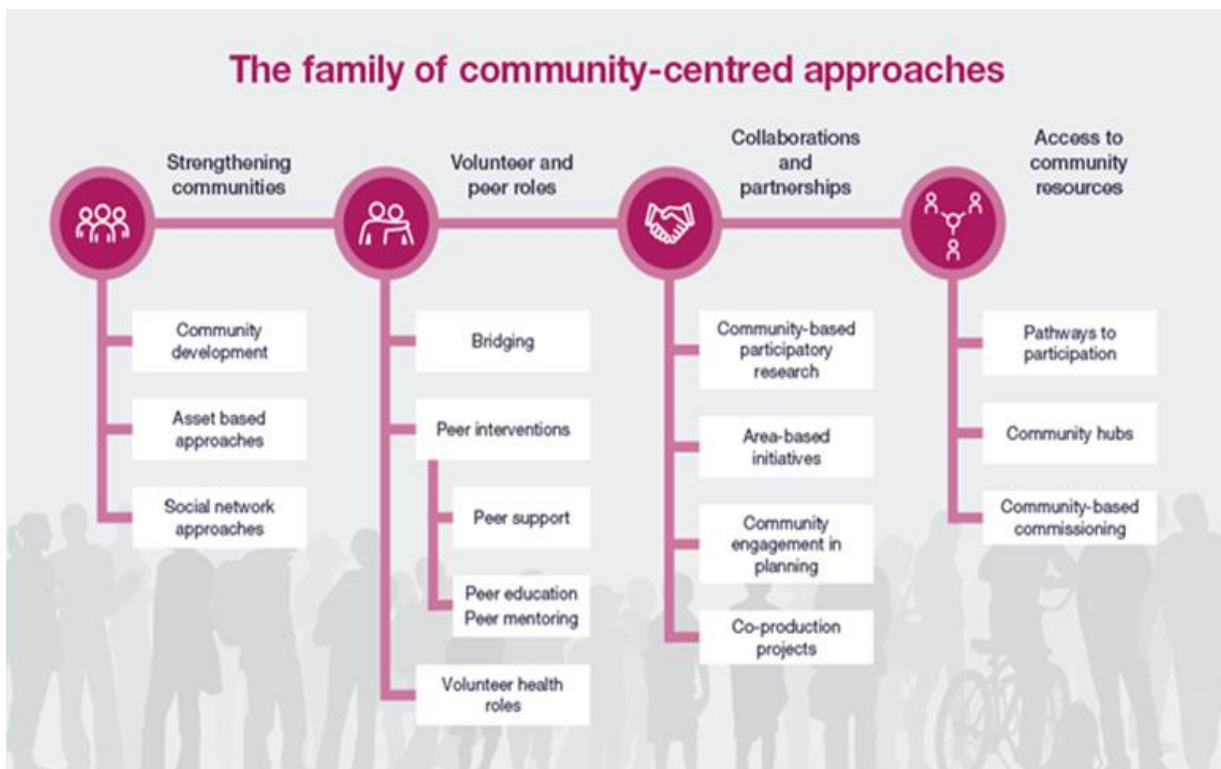


Figure 3: The ‘family of community-centred approaches’<sup>10</sup>

PHE will be supporting the implementation of Place-Based Approaches (PBA) to Reducing Health Inequalities through the National Health Inequalities Unit and PHE centres and regions. A key element will be support to utilise the PBA, including how areas can scale and systematise community-centred public health in order to improve population health and reduce health inequalities. PHE are piloting and evaluating the use of the PBA framework and tools in at least 3 local areas, before rolling out further support more widely.

## Conclusions

Building healthy, resilient, connected and empowered communities is a public health priority shared across many sectors. A whole system response is needed to maximise impact and improve the health of the poorest fastest. This involves scaling a range of community-centred approaches, addressing community level determinants and working at all levels of a system.

Local decision makers can adopt the key elements, values and principles of a whole system approach to community-centred public health to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of action to build healthy communities.

Communities are a central part of the public health system and community-centred ways of working should be integral to whole system action to improve population health. This briefing and linked resources can be used to support place-based working and whole system approaches on a range of public health issues.

### How was this briefing developed?

This briefing summarises findings from a study on whole system approaches to community-centred public health, which explored the principles, practice and steps to achieving whole system approaches. Published evidence and learning from current practice was drawn together, and early findings were reviewed with stakeholders. Evidence sources included:

- interviews with public health leaders from 12 local areas already doing whole system work with communities
- desk-based review of other whole system frameworks from the UK and international evidence, including from a whole system systematic review<sup>16</sup>
- online survey of 342 members of the PHE People's Panel, to get the views of citizens about what is needed to support healthy communities<sup>17</sup>
- roundtable with 23 representatives from local and national bodies, to test out early findings and how they fitted within the current context



# Appendix 1 – List of PHE resources on healthy communities

Public Health England has produced a range of resources in relation to healthy communities designed to provide system leadership, explore data & evidence, share practice, and support implementation in local systems. These resources are listed below.

- 1. Health Matters: community-centred approaches for health & wellbeing**  
Health Matters is a resource for local authorities and health professionals which brings together the latest data and evidence, makes the case for effective public health interventions and highlights tools and resources that can facilitate local and national action. The February 2018 edition focused on community-centred approaches for health and wellbeing.  
<https://bit.ly/2CM7f68>
- 2. A guide to community-centred approaches for health & wellbeing**  
This guidance explores community-centred approaches for health and wellbeing, laying out what we mean by ‘communities’, why we should work with them and why community factors are important to health. It highlights relevant evidence and outlines a ‘family of approaches’ for evidence-based community-centred approaches for health and wellbeing.  
<https://bit.ly/1E89v2h>
- 3. Health inequalities: place-based approaches to reduce health inequalities**  
This suite of resources aims to:
  - reinforce a common understanding of the complex causes and costs of health inequalities
  - provide a practical framework and tools for places to reduce health inequalitiesIt includes a main report, as well as a number of tools to help guide place based action on health inequalities. They are accompanied by a slide-deck, a guide to relevant local and national data, and a number of case studies.  
<https://bit.ly/2Ymcrcs8>
- 4. Menu of evidence-based intervention and approaches for addressing and reducing health inequalities**  
This resource provides a catalogue of interventions that local healthcare systems and commissioners, working with partners across the system, can draw on to take effective action at neighbourhood, place and system-level to reduce health inequalities (including some related to healthy communities and community-centred approaches). It is being developed through a phased approach, which will run through the life of the NHS Long Term Plan. It will enable NHS England NHS Improvement to identify where there are gaps in evidence and to further develop or commission work to fill these gaps.  
<https://bit.ly/34cwmx1>

**5. Community-centred and asset-based approaches: practice examples**

Practice examples are an important way of capturing the evidence on what is working, why and how, and what learning is useful for other areas. PHE hosts a number of practice examples, including a growing collection from across England that has been captured as part of its programme of work to improve access to evidence on community-centred and asset-based approaches.

<https://bit.ly/2xVaBDY>

**6. PHE healthy communities Knowledge Hub site**

This site is aimed at colleagues from across health systems in England, both those working at a national level and those working at place, to share info and collaborate in relation to healthy communities and community-centred/asset-based approaches. A free Knowledge Hub account is required to make use of this resource.

<https://bit.ly/2kNUkO3>

**7. Community-centred approaches to health improvement: e-learning**

These 2 e-learning modules will focus on community-centred approaches to improving health and wellbeing. Module 1 covers the background evidence and theory on why this is important and what approaches work. Module 2 involves practical exercises to apply this knowledge. A free e-Learning for Healthcare account is required to make use of this resource.

<https://bit.ly/2LpaJV3>

**8. Community-centred practice: applying All Our Health**

All Our Health provides a framework of evidence to guide healthcare professionals in preventing illness, protecting health and promoting wellbeing. This guidance includes information to enable these staff to adopt community-centred ways of working that help to improve the health and wellbeing of the most marginalised communities.

<https://bit.ly/2Lti45I>

**9. PHE blogs on healthy communities**

PHE has produced a range of blogs that touch on healthy communities and community-centred approaches which are:

- Realising the potential of community assets to improve our health and wellbeing – author: Prof Paul Johnstone - <https://bit.ly/2wRLVy2>
- the role of communities and the VCSE sector in public health – author: Dr Andrew Furber - <https://bit.ly/2Tu2SpL>

**10. PHE Fingertips Profiles: wider determinants of health (WDoH) tool**

This profile aims to provide the public health system with intelligence regarding wider determinants of health to help improve population health and reduce health inequalities, by:

- providing a set of indicators which describe a range of WDoH and enable a comparison of these factors between areas
- highlighting relationships between wider determinants and other risk factors/health outcomes

- providing, where possible, links to further resources for tackling WDoH, e.g. best practice, case studies, interventions, guidance, or links to other data tools/analyses
- <https://bit.ly/2NZXFHC>

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