

Healthy Towns Workshop

Wednesday 18th June 2008
Oxford

Summary of main points

An expert stakeholder meeting was held in Oxford to discuss the Healthy Community Challenge fund on 18 June 2008. The objective of the meeting was to discuss how to maximise the benefits from the programme of work created by the fund.

This note provides a brief summary of the key points raised in the meeting.

Session 1: What is a Healthy Town?

There is no 'prescription' or 'template' for a healthy town. Many issues will be determined by local conditions and the 'logic model' for change within each town. However, the group identified a number of important factors that a healthy town should strive towards, under the headings physical; social; and political.

Healthy towns should...

(Physical)

- make healthy choices (for food and activity) the easy and convenient choices;
- have a walkable environment;
- implement policies to support modal shift away from cars to physically active modes;
- have well connected streets;
- feel safe;
- feel vibrant and be pleasant places to live.

(Social)

- have strong social networks
- be equitable
- be economically vibrant
- have a shared public vision
- feel owned by the local community

(Political)

- implement realistic and achievable change
- see rapid and tangible benefits
- have a shared political vision
- be sustainable

Session 2: What are the key implementation factors?

The project is running for two years in the first instance, which is a short time to see widescale change. The workshop attendees discussed what might realistically be achieved in this timescale. They focused on discussing the key factors in implementing the healthy towns programme.

- The over-riding criterion is demonstrable wide-reaching local political commitment as without this any initiative is unlikely to succeed. This needs to be cross-sectoral and cross-party.
- Each proposal will need a strong underpinning rationale; there need to be well structured proposals that make logical sense
- It is better to have a few ideas done well than to spread resources thinly across a large number of initiatives
- Towns may benefit from being quite specific about the expected outcomes and the target populations
- Lessons from the first two years need to be transferable to other towns and other settings as much as possible
- Tangible early successes will be important to make the case for continued funding
- The programme can learn valuable lessons from the cycling demonstration towns, sustainable travel towns and other similar programmes
- There should be a strong local commitment to learning from experience
- The towns need to demonstrate long term sustainability of their initiatives

A number of potential barriers to implementation were identified:

- potential legal obstacles
- staff changes within the towns, especially if a small number of individuals is driving the process
- a possible imbalance of skills/capacity relative to need
- the need to clarify evaluation issues early in the process

Session 3: Monitoring and Evaluation:

The workshop attendees were unanimous in their support for strong independent evaluation of the programme in order to contribute to the evidence base. Key issues raised were:

- the importance of an integrated evaluation – for example bringing together process and outcome evaluation
- the need for a strong relationship between the evaluators and the DH.
- the importance of selecting appropriate indicators that will show results; and will reflect the logic model for change in each town;
- the need to measure change in both people and places
- The importance of controls (ie non-intervention areas), while being realistic about sources of comparison data and locations
- BMI data should be collected as part of the evaluation but are not to be seen as the only outcome variable;
- Methods of research management were discussed with support for some coordination.
- We must learn from existing and previous evaluations

Session 4: Feedback and Refinement

The workshop attendees considered the next steps in refining the programme. Issues to be addressed include:

- Flexibility around both initiatives and interventions
- Creating a network of healthy towns to be able to share emerging knowledge, and other mechanisms for ongoing support
- Not forgetting the possibility of unintended consequences (both positive and negative)
- Importance to capture the variety of interventions developed by the diverse group of areas
- Ensuring strong cross-government links - Making/strengthening links to other initiatives (Connect2, Cycling Demo Towns, Sustainable Travel Towns, Eco Towns, WHO Healthy Cities).

Further information on the Healthy Communities Challenge fund and "Healthy Towns" is available from:

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