

DLUCH Community Champions Programme Case Study

Name of scheme: Covid Community Champions

Local area(s) covered: Doncaster City

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How does this scheme support your local COVID-19 response? Are there other priorities for your champions?

COVID Community Champions is a scheme that was initiated to increase knowledge and awareness on COVID-19 in those that were most at risk. In Doncaster the scheme, otherwise known as the Community Connectors programme, launched in March 2021 and continues at present, albeit at a smaller scale than the original programme. The programme supported Doncaster Council to better understand the challenges that communities were facing and the strength these communities possessed in supporting Doncaster's COVID-19 recovery.

In summary, community connectors were conceived to:

- Use informal networks, local connections and knowledge to reach people experiencing poverty, in workplaces, communities, neighbourhoods and local social hubs,
- Have motivational and strengths-based conversations,
- Link with existing community groups and organisations who are already embedded in the heart of the communities, leaving a legacy through them,
- Increase capability, opportunity and motivation, to self-motivate and increase community participation
- Reach people who are isolated and disconnected from their community
- Support others to access vaccination

How did the scheme come about? When did it first come about?

The Community Connectors programme predated the COVID-19 pandemic and considering its previous successes, a model of the programme focused on COVID-19 support was developed in 2020. The council secured funding from the former Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (now the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) to facilitate the activities of ten community connectors between March 2021 and March 2022 across the borough. This funding was focused on COVID-19 response and recovery, namely driving uptake of vaccine in the most at-risk groups and myth busting. The council have since been awarded a costed extension from April 2022 until March 2023. This has enabled some continued activity on community engagement up until present

Please briefly describe your local population. Does your scheme target any specific population groups?

Doncaster is in the 10th percentile of deprived communities and has generally poorer health than England as a whole¹. Doncaster is known as a place of places – with pockets of people including the old mining community and pockets of communities from minority ethnic groups, for example those for whom English is a second language. 91.8% of Doncaster residents are White British, the other two largest groups are Other White (3.4%) and Asian (2.5%)².

Community connectors aimed to engage community groups who were at higher risk of ill-health as a result of catching COVID, and those that had lower uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine. This included: people with learning disabilities, people with physical disabilities, the LGBTQA+ community, parents, elderly, people experiencing mental health issues and Black and minority ethnic groups.

The connectors were spread across Doncaster to best meet the needs of different groups, e.g.:

- Some situated in Balby and Hexthorpe (centre of Doncaster) to best reach Eastern European communities and immigrants in this area
- Some operating online
- Some physically located within the centre of Doncaster in areas like the Town Centre, Intake, Balby and Hyde Park

How were champions recruited?

Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector (VCFS) organisations were invited to become 'host organisations' who would recruit and employ a Community Connector to work for 20 hours per week focusing on priority communities across the borough. Many of these host organisations were from the community sector and well grounded across different areas in Doncaster. They included:

- One organisation targeted at older people
- One organisation targeted at Eastern European communities
- One organisation targeted at supporting people experience mental health issues
- One organisation targeted at the LGBTQA+ community
- Two organisations targeted at supporting people experiencing poverty
- Two organisations targeting women from Black and minority ethnic communities
- Two organisations targeting people with disabilities

Connectors were socially engaged members of the community, knowledgeable of the needs, assets, and strengths of their local areas. They facilitated information provision, development of relationships and the access to services and activities between so called 'hard-to-reach' groups. Their personality, local expertise and

¹ Doncaster 2018/19 Joint Strategic Needs Assessment [Item 9 - State of Health Report2019 v3.pdf \(modern.gov.co.uk\)](#)

² Doncaster State of the Borough 2017 [Doncaster State of Borough Appendix.pdf \(modern.gov.co.uk\)](#)

shared/lived experience with the targeted audience strengthens their ability to reach ethnically diverse groups and other minorities.

How does the scheme work? Which organisation or groups are involved?

The scheme sought to overcome barriers to COVID-19 vaccination across vulnerable groups in Doncaster and to understand the roots of these barriers which included cultural beliefs, perceived discrimination/ stigma by the health system, inaccessible information (including language barriers), negative media, safety, mistrust, and other fears around the vaccination process itself.

Connectors used a variety of methods and channels to engage their target audience including:

- using appreciative inquiry as a starting point and conversation on vaccinations
- using social activities such as a podcast, home visits, peer support groups, telephone calls and developing songs
- word-of-mouth communication
- networking with other organisations including Doncaster college, Doncaster Keeping Safe Forum, NHS Doncaster and Rotherham commissioning clinical groups, community hubs, places of worship, food banks and care homes
- social media, video and telephone calls

How were champions trained and supported?

Evidence shows the importance of training community connectors to foster community organisation, leadership, and empowerment³.

The host organisations trained and provided most of the day-to-day support for the community connectors. For many of these organisations, training was grounded in lived experience and their close connections to the communities in which they delivered services.

As an optional task, community connectors were offered training from Doncaster Council to conduct an appreciative inquiry with their closest networks. This proved to be a useful method for connectors to engage with community members.

How did you engage and communicate with champions?

The interactions between local officers and community connectors were collaborative and not hierarchical. The use of existing networks was a key aspect of this success in engaging champions. It meant that we were able to share good practice, support and plan activities collaboratively as well as scoping and proposing solutions to similar problems that champions were encountering.

Has the scheme been evaluated in any way?

³ Public Health England. (2021). A rapid scoping review of community champion approaches for the pandemic response and recovery

An evaluation report was prepared outlining the scheme, its objectives and its outcomes.

What outcomes has the scheme led to?

The role of community connectors has been important to improve local relationships between underserved groups and services in Doncaster. The programme initially raised awareness of cultural barriers around vaccination and how to overcome them in targeted populations by working concomitantly with different stakeholders (i.e., council officers, GPs, social enterprises, etc). The programme helped to ensure that vaccination centres were more culturally sensitive of the needs of specific groups including Black and minority ethnic communities, sex and gender minorities; it helped building confidence in local and national authorities around the management of COVID, including trust in the vaccine and services administering it.

What has been your key learning from the scheme to date?

Through this scheme we've observed a variety of elements which will contribute to successful implementation of similar schemes in the future. This includes:

- Getting the balance right between support for connectors vs. championing their autonomy – we kept the job descriptions for the connectors loose however learnt that connectors would have benefitted from stronger information pathways between the council and the NHS
- The scheme acted as a springboard for some connectors who continued engagement with their communities to varying extents, e.g., the LGBTQA+ champion who continues to engage their communities on issues beyond COVID-19
- When it comes to measuring engagement having less is more. Having fewer metrics makes evaluation easier
- A knowledge hub or social media group (e.g., on WhatsApp) is hugely useful in facilitating shared learning and practice

How are you planning to develop your scheme moving forward?

Many of the connectors and the host organisations work within limited resource to deliver services and engagement. The community champions scheme has been a hugely valuable resource for a finite period of time and will be difficult to deliver this level of engagement without this resource. Despite this, many of the connectors have developed strong relationships with their community groups – a useful starting point for future engagement initiatives where there is resource available.

Links to any further information

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