

# EVIDENCE SUMMARY



## EMPOWERMENT AND HEALTH & WELL-BEING

### Key messages

- Empowerment is about individuals and communities increasing control over their lives and their health.
- Empowerment approaches have a positive impact on people's health & well-being. Improved confidence, self-esteem, sense of community, sense of control and increased knowledge and awareness are all proven outcomes.
- There is a relationship between individual and community empowerment as empowered individuals can work together to bring about changes in communities, local services, organisations and policy.
- Community engagement is beneficial for strengthening connections in communities.
- The evidence base around empowerment and health & well-being is under-developed.
- More evaluation is needed to trace the link between empowerment approaches and health outcomes.

### What is this evidence summary about?

This evidence summary outlines the evidence base for empowerment approaches to improve health & well-being. The summary has been produced for Altogether Better, a five-year programme funded through the BIG Lottery which aims to empower people across the Yorkshire and Humber region to lead healthier lives.

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South, J. and Woodall, J. (2010) Empowerment and Health & Well-being: Evidence summary. Leeds, Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Metropolitan University. A full report is also available that presents detailed findings from this evidence review and includes review methods and a full reference list.



## About Altogether Better

A five year regional collaborative programme.

Launched in 2008 and awarded £6.8m from the BIG Lottery Well-being fund.

16 locally delivered flagship projects, testing out different community health champion approaches in a range of settings.

Aims to recruit, train and support around 13,000 community and workplace health champions passing on their knowledge, skills, and experience.

Includes a Learning Network aimed at sharing intelligence, experience, and learning across projects.

Works to build a systematic approach to community empowerment as a means of tackling health inequalities.

Expected to reach 13,000 direct beneficiaries who it is estimated will indirectly benefit a further 70,000 people.

Altogether Better is based on an empowerment approach – this means equipping members of the public with the knowledge, confidence and skills to make a difference in their communities. This summary sets out the evidence base on empowerment and health & well-being for anyone involved in commissioning, planning, delivering or evaluating health programmes.

## What does empowerment mean?

Empowerment is a central principle for health promotion as it concerns individuals and communities increasing control over their lives and their health. There is some confusion over what empowerment really means because the term is used in different contexts to mean different things. Empowerment is both a process and an outcome; it is not just about individuals changing, but it is also about environmental, organisational and system change.

Individual empowerment is about people having a sense of control over their lives through building people's confidence, boosting their self-esteem, developing their coping mechanisms or enhancing their personal skills. Having a sense of control is important as it has a direct effect on mental and physical health.

Community empowerment is about allowing people to take control of the decisions that influence their lives and health. It involves communities becoming more organised and ultimately taking action to create social change. Participation is an important feature of community empowerment as individuals have a better chance of achieving their health goals if they work together with other people who face similar issues.

## What difference does empowerment make to health and well-being?

There is a strong case for using empowerment approaches based on the theory and principles of health promotion. There is, however, a general lack of high-quality research in this area. Much of the available evidence comes from outside the UK and is focused on specific population groups such as women, young people, and people at risk of HIV/AIDS.

There is some evidence that empowerment strategies lead to improved health outcomes for individuals in relation to:

- Improved psychological well-being, including increased confidence and better self-esteem.
- Gaining a greater sense of personal control, often through participating in groups with others who share common interests.
- Increased knowledge, awareness, skills and behaviour change. Positive outcomes have been reported when empowerment strategies have been used with high-risk groups such as sex workers or drug users.
- Improving health status including better mental health and improved disease management where programmes are focused on helping people with long term conditions.
- A greater sense of community, broadened social networks and social support; all of which can help people deal with stressful situations and reach their health goals.

Less is known about whether empowerment approaches make a difference to the health & well-being of communities. This is because long term health effects at a community-level are difficult to measure and because there is limited research on the benefits of community participation. There is good evidence that community engagement is beneficial for social cohesion, social capital and strengthening relationships and trust among participants. There is also evidence that empowerment strategies can result in greater community influence, better and more equitable services, and policy changes that support improved health.

## How can communities be empowered to improve health?

Empowerment cannot be given to people, but practitioners can help to create situations where empowerment is likely, such as helping people build confidence or facilitating groups. Enabling factors for community empowerment include:

- Incorporating empowerment approaches within broad social and economic strategies aimed at creating greater equity.
- Working with existing community organisations and community forums to promote local engagement.
- Having funding, support mechanisms and development opportunities in place.
- Ensuring equal relationships between communities and professionals.

Inhibiting factors include resistance by professionals and public officials to sharing power, the difficulty of mobilising marginalised communities, and the lack of community influence over decisions.

## How can the evidence base be built?

Empowerment is a term that is used repeatedly in health policy and practice, but there needs to be more UK-based evidence on effective empowerment processes and measurable health outcomes. Local evaluations can help build an evidence base on empowerment approaches. Evaluation needs to:

- take account of the different local contexts and community needs
- develop an understanding of empowerment processes, how it works and for whom.
- use a mix of research methods, both quantitative and qualitative, to capture different types of health outcome.
- examine the long term impact on communities and organisations, as well as following up individuals who take part.
- develop the skills of practitioners and community members to allow them to participate fully in evaluating empowerment approaches.

## What are the implications for policy and practice?

Empowerment approaches have the potential to improve the health & well-being of individuals and communities, and to change the environmental and social factors that lead to poor health and inequalities. Empowerment is a complex process involving profound changes to people, and the way that communities and organisations work. For *Altogether Better*, the building block of empowerment is developing community health champions, who are equipped with the knowledge, confidence and skills to make a difference in their communities. Overall, there are seven recommendations for practice:

1. Individual and community empowerment should be seen as linked. *Altogether Better* is based on the principle that as people become empowered they will work together to create positive changes and to challenge the system.
2. Empowerment approaches have a beneficial impact on individuals' health and well-being including increased self-esteem, sense of community, and knowledge and awareness.
3. Practitioners can help to create situations where empowerment is likely through helping people build confidence or by facilitating groups.
4. Efforts need to be made to put relationships between professionals and communities on an equal footing.
5. Involving people in planning and decision-making is more likely to result in positive changes in health or the determinants of health.
6. Having a clear and explicit definition of what empowerment means will help ensure people are working toward a shared goal.
7. Practitioners and community members should be encouraged to develop evaluation skills so that they can begin to measure the effectiveness of their work and help build an evidence base.

## Key references

Adamson, D. and Bromiley, R. (2008) Community empowerment in practice: lessons from communities first. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

NICE. (2008) Community engagement to improve health. London: National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.

Laverack, G. (2006) Improving health outcomes through community empowerment: a review of the literature. *Journal of Health, Population, and Nutrition*. 2006;24(1):113-20.

Wallerstein, N. (2006) What is the Evidence on Effectiveness of Empowerment to Improve Health? Report for the Health Evidence Network (HEN).

## How was this evidence summary produced?

This evidence summary was developed by the Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Metropolitan University. It summarises the results of a rapid review of evidence on Empowerment and Health & Well-being that drew on 13 published reviews. A full report is available which presents detailed findings from the evidence review and includes review methods and a full reference list.

Two further evidence reviews were undertaken as part of the Altogether Better evaluation. These are:

- community health champions
- mental health and employment

All evidence reviews and summaries can be downloaded from the Altogether Better website

[www.altogetherbetter.org.uk](http://www.altogetherbetter.org.uk)



## Further information

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## Acknowledgements

This evidence summary was commissioned as part of the evaluation of Altogether Better, the BIG Lottery well-being programme for Yorkshire & Humber.

When referencing this document please use the following citation:

*South, J. and Woodall, J. (2010) Empowerment and Health & Well-being: Evidence summary. Leeds, Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Metropolitan University.*

September 2010