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VOiCE Case Studies

Community Engagement and Health Inequalities

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Community Engagement and Health Inequalities

Overview

The key purposes of the Equally Well Development Site were to ensure that future actions reflected local needs and aspirations and also to promote community ownership and participation in the test site development. The focus for this case study is therefore an analysis of the application of community engagement approaches in tackling health inequalities, and how this has impacted on the community and on the partners involved in the Equally Well process both at a local and national level.

Context

'Equally Well' is the report of the Scottish Government's Health Inequalities Task Force and was produced in 2008. A key part of implementing the recommendations of Equally Well was the setting up of local test sites, each focusing on a different Equally Well priority. The theme of the Dundee test site is improving community mental wellbeing. Each test site is a partnership involving local public services, aimed at addressing the determinants of inequalities in the health and wellbeing of people.

Initial discussions with Equally Well stakeholders at a national level indicated a high level of interest in VOiCE and it was agreed that Dundee should be the focus for the VOiCE development site. Use of VOiCE focused on one discrete piece of community engagement – the community conference on mental wellbeing in the Stobswell area of Dundee.

Stobswell Community Mental Wellbeing Conference

Description

The piece of engagement chosen for the VOiCE development site was the organisation, planning, implementation and evaluation of a community conference focusing on mental wellbeing in the Stobswell area of Dundee. The Equally Well lead officer (who is also an experienced community worker) worked with a planning group of local workers, and involved local residents and forums in discussions about the engagement process. The engagement took place over an 8 month period during 2009 and followed a complete Analyse, Plan, Do and Review cycle. Generally it was felt to have achieved the outcomes indicated in the plan, that of raising awareness and ownership of the test site for local people and service providers, and identifying assets, influences and indicators for mental wellbeing. In addition VOiCE proved extremely useful in providing a framework for the process of engagement as well as highlighting key strength areas and areas for improvement.

Process Analysis

Some members of the working group for the Stobswell work had relatively low starting levels of understanding about mental wellbeing. Most were relatively experienced in some forms of community engagement, particularly through participation in the local community planning process. This was enhanced by a huge commitment to the area and a detailed knowledge and understanding of the issues faced by local residents. The Lead Officer made a conscious decision not to explicitly focus too much on the use of the VOiCE database at the analysis and planning stage. However, the VOiCE process was still followed through use of the trigger questions throughout the whole process of engagement. This demonstrates that the questions VOiCE raises can be used without the participants needing to be involved in directly working on the database.

As is usual with pieces of engagement that are focused round events, the actual practicalities and actions took over at the implementation stage. During this time it fell to the Lead Officer to continue to keep up with the recording in order to ensure that planned actions were being undertaken and any remedial actions agreed and implemented. Her initial fears about data input proved to be unfounded as this wasn't as time consuming as first thought. Again this demonstrates that, as long as the structure of VOiCE is used in framing and guiding the engagement process, participants do not necessarily need to be involved in directly using the tool.

It was only really after the event, at the review stage, that there was more explicit reference to the use of VOiCE as being the framework that underpinned the engagement process. At the review stage some participants were initially quite reluctant and reserved about self-evaluating and scoring. This may have been to do with the lack of knowledge/ awareness of VOiCE and is something which needs some attention if participants are not directly involved in using the database throughout the full community engagement process. However, it may also have been connected to some participants not having experience of the kind of self-evaluation processes that are used in VOiCE. Another factor was that the review session was incorporated into a regular planning group meeting which didn't give enough time for proper reflection and didn't make it a distinctive enough element of the process. It would have been really useful to set the review date right at the start as this would have ensured the discipline to run the session when planned and to treat it as a key part of the process.

Review, Analysis and Learning

On reflecting on the use of VOiCE in Stobswell the Equally Well Lead Officer highlighted the following key learning points:

- In an effort to try and keep the use of VOiCE contained and manageable it was decided to use it solely to analyse, plan, implement and review the Community Conference. However, undertaking any piece of community engagement naturally starts to impact on other work, and influences thinking about practice. In retrospect it would have been useful not to limit VOiCE to just the Stobswell Conference but to use it for a range of engagement activity involved in the test site work. Examples of these activities include questionnaires, focus group sessions and presentations/ inputs to a variety of local meetings and events.
- The wider application of VOiCE as a community engagement learning tool is still to be achieved. Through the test site there has been some limited use of VOiCE but wider dissemination of the learning is needed which can then influence others in their community engagement practice.
- In dealing with workers/agencies regarding their impact on mental wellbeing, VOiCE helps to make it real and can/should be used to help this process along. It asks the questions that stimulate thinking amongst service providers and helps make the community engagement process tangible.
- Being based on the Standards it helps to focus a range of workers with differing levels of knowledge and experience and helps to ensure consistency of approach. The impacts on mental wellbeing are so wide that VOiCE can help to give a focus.

Overall Outcomes

Mental wellbeing is one of the main causes and consequences of health inequalities. In relation to health improvement the process of dealing with symptoms lies mainly with the medical profession whilst the process of dealing with the health determinants often lies elsewhere (this is even more significant within the field of mental wellbeing). In dealing with health determinants the process of engaging people is a health improving activity in itself (gaining control, self-respect, self-esteem, confidence, skills, etc.).

The use of VOiCE in the Equally Well Test Site in Dundee has been informative and interesting and highlights the potential for a whole range of further uses in relation to supporting community engagement in tackling health inequalities. As a direct result of the Development Site work some shared learning with other Equally Well Test Sites has already taken place which has led to interest in use of VOiCE in other areas.

