



Blog: Smiles and tea – the community volunteers who improve health

**Sometimes, it's not someone medically trained who can turn your health around, but someone just like you. Here, our health programme advisor Michelle Smith talks about how community spirit and peer support can change lives.**

By Michelle Smith



Health Helpers receive their certificates

Many people in West Howe enjoy a good quality of life.

Having worked in the area during the past two years, I have witnessed the enormous amount of community spirit among residents for myself. They really look out for each other and take pride in their local neighbourhood. I have always been welcomed with a friendly smile and a cup of tea. I look forward to my visits.

That said, rather shockingly, the evidence still shows that the life expectancy of those living in West Howe is 10 years shorter than those living in other areas of Bournemouth. The number of people living with long-term health issues that affect their daily activities, such as obesity, diabetes, mental health, heart and lung disease, is also high.

So, with a target to reduce the gap in life expectancy experienced across Dorset, West Howe is a priority neighbourhood for Public Health Dorset and I was really excited to be part of West Howe Community Enterprises' celebration event for the Health Helpers programme last week.

Health Helpers are local people who are trained as volunteers to work within their own communities and networks. They carry out their volunteering in an informal manner as part of their everyday interactions to 'champion the health needs of their communities'. Acting as peers, they use their own life experiences and knowledge to influence their friends, families, neighbours and colleagues to make positive health choices.

The celebration event saw the first group of local volunteers receive their certificates of achievement having successfully completed the Royal Society of Public Health's 'Understanding Health Improvement' training course.

Now the group, who would be the first to admit that their last experiences of academic achievement and learning may not have been a very positive one, have completed their



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training it was clear to see that they were extremely excited about going out into the community to help others make a change and that the experience had already had a positive impact on the volunteers themselves.

We fund the West Howe project, which is a one-year pilot programme that aims to recruit around 20 health helpers across the area as part of our health improvement aims.

It is based on a successful national model that has been valuable in bridging the gap between communities and health services. It has been demonstrated as successful in helping people overcome barriers to making healthier choices as the volunteers involved have a shared experience. They also don't have time restraints that could affect how they work with someone.

Their role is not to give medical advice but more to encourage informal discussion about health and wellbeing and look to motivate and support people into appropriate services.

Seeing the enthusiasm of the first West Howe Health Helpers, I am confident that they, and the community which they are part of, will demonstrate how effective this way of working is to helping people improve their lifestyles and health. After all, the huge amount of community spirit West Howe has will certainly be a great starting point.

Some of the most motivating conversations start with a smile and a cup of tea.