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Darlington Healthy New Towns: evaluating the building of a healthy community

Fuse researchers scoped an evaluation plan for the Darlington Healthy New Towns (DHNT) programme to identify ways to improve the health and wellbeing of residents and to consider how these successful outcomes would be achieved and recorded in the future delivery of the programme.

Healthy New Towns (HNT) is a three-year (2016-19) NHS England (NHSE) initiative, which is working with ten housing developments across the country to shape the health of communities and to rethink how health and care services can be delivered from an environmental perspective. Darlington was selected as one of 10 national pilot sites, where the programme is delivered by a local partnership of the Council, Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), two NHS Foundation Trusts, housebuilding company 'Keepmoat', and digital health technology provider 'Inhealthcare'.

A rapid review of the existing evidence was conducted relating to the three main themes within the programme: Regeneration and Housing, New Models of Care, and Digital innovations related to health and care delivery. The review looked at the potential health impact of DHNT and the links with broader outcomes, such as narrowing the gap on healthy life expectancy; economic growth; use of digital technology; and sustainable, efficient, and effective care services. In addition, face-to-face interviews with 11 stakeholders, six academics, and one resident were conducted to explore different evaluation options.

The evidence highlighted positive health outcomes associated with general housing improvement, neighbourhood design, the food environment, natural and sustainable environment, and transport.

Access to health and care services was found to be important in determining whether individuals seek treatment, as people

tend to limit their use of services to the small area in which they live. Digital technologies, such as online treatment and support services, showed the potential for long and short-term improvements through reducing the barriers associated with face-to-face appointments. Moreover, online services can increase commitment to treatment and reduce the time and cost.

As DHNT is currently in the early stages of implementation, Fuse recommended a process evaluation to capture what helps and hinders the successful implementation of the various work streams within the programme.

Key Findings

- Darlington Healthy New Towns could have sustainable, long-term, effects on the health of the local population.
- However, the short timescales for demonstrating impact could lead to a return to tried and tested activities, losing the innovative momentum that the programme was built upon.
- DHNT has enabled conversations between isolated Council departments, such as planning, housing, health and social care and local health organisations, such as CCGs and NHS Foundation Trusts, and private providers Keepmoat and Inhealthcare.
- Continuing these conversations, and embedding them into organisations, requires structural changes and cultural shifts, both from practitioners and patients.
- Patients need to understand their choices and how they can access new services, while practitioners need to embrace a new way of working (in hubs with experts from different fields).
- Community-based activities should focus on building a stronger sense of community for successful engagement with residents and for DHNT activities to become locally embedded.

Evaluation Implications

- The evaluation needs to capture what processes and systems have changed as part of the implementation of DHNT and consider the impact of these changes over the longer term.
- A phased approach is suggested, starting with a process evaluation of the implementation to identify ways to improve the health and wellbeing of residents. This will be followed by research testing these ideas.
- This approach would allow the evaluation to be flexible and enable the programme to adapt, if emerging evidence suggest negative unintended consequences of the implemented interventions.
- To ensure that learning is captured as early as possible, a member of the research team could be embedded within the Council to work with stakeholders, while forging stronger relationships with DHNT partners.
- More research is needed to understand what helps and hinders people in the uptake of technologies to manage their own care.

“Healthy New Towns is about structures, it shouldn’t be about personalities, because people leave and they move on... and if you haven’t got the structure in place, it will be a challenge going forward”

(DHNT stakeholder)

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Researchers from Fuse (the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health) based at Durham University and Newcastle University were commissioned by the Darlington Healthy New Towns Collaborative to scope an evaluation plan for the programme. The scoping work consisted of a review of the existing evidence and face-to-face interviews with 18 stakeholders. This was used to identify ways to improve the health and wellbeing of residents and to consider how these successful outcomes would be achieved and recorded in the future delivery of the programme. The scoping report identified how academics from across the five North East universities could collaborate with policy and practice partners, engaged in the implementation of the programme, to take forward discreet research projects within the evaluation.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Fuse is one of five UKCRC Public Health Research Centres of Excellence. It brings together public health researchers from across the five universities in North East England.

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