A Guide to Collaborative Action for Community Wellbeing: Summary of evidence

Wellbeing is a broad concept which encompasses components of good health including physical, social, mental, spiritual and environmental. We searched the literature for common elements in community-led initiatives that influence mental wellbeing. We found that these initiatives often included activities which affected all aspects of wellbeing.

Here we describe elements of community wellbeing collaboratives (CWC) found in the literature*. However, as no two communities are identical, each initiative should be shaped to the local context. This is a guide, not a recipe for improving community wellbeing.

CWC initiatives are often developed to address a particular contributor to community wellbeing such as social capital, social participation and isolation, community pride, youth engagement and parental support. Initiatives need to be based on a good understanding of the community driven by objective data. The literature suggests that community engagement, ownership and empowerment are more likely if the community identifies this area for improvement itself1. In essence, a local process of co-design between a range of community members can help to embed environmental, organisational and behavioural changes in their community.

Action: Establish purpose & rationale

- Consider the views of a broad range of community members. If there is significant interest in action from the community, then gather information from objective data sources, meetings, interviews and forums to establish what the citizens want to change in the community2,4.
- Identify and map local needs, assets and strengths5. A strengths-based approach tends to be more constructive if the community is to progress the initiative6.
- Steering groups are a way to formalise a plan of action based on the feedback from the community. This group of dedicated individuals, representative of the wider community, may include could include community members, local businesses, health workers, NGOs, or local representatives of government2,7.

Result: Shared vision

Action: Plan with partners

- The steering group should meet regularly, maintain effective communication and develop trust with their community through democratic decision making and collaboration on short-term goals7,8.
- Creating collaborative relationships, collective accountability and including a range of stakeholders is important to achieve the desired goals, share resources and increase sustainable efforts and partner satisfaction9. A bridge between the steering committee and local policy-makers may help implement plans4.
- A framework for roles and responsibilities should be developed so that each partner is clear on their role and the overall goal of the initiative10,11. An evidence-informed logic model helps create the compelling case for community wellbeing and frame the priorities, actors and actions of the initiative12.
- Collaboration between partners on grant applications can assist in obtaining resources13.
- Community collaborators should be aware that it takes time to realise change. Progress may appear to be slow and funding limited at the beginning of an initiative14. Try not to let this be a barrier to progress.

Result: Collective understanding
**Action: Implement & engage**

- Engage volunteers, champions and mentors to help work in the community. Those with a lived experience can be especially valuable\(^\text{15}\).
- Educate community members about mental health. This will help to decrease stigma and also help people identify specific actions that may improve their mental health\(^\text{16}\).
- Work with established groups in the community to organise mentally healthy activities that foster a sense of purpose and pleasure for participants\(^\text{14,17}\).
- Develop ‘safe spaces’ for the community to go to and talk, and perhaps learn about options for mental health care\(^\text{18}\). Overall, action should be designed to address the area for improvement within each specific community. A toolkit of practical action from other initiatives can be found below.

**Result: Collaborative action**

**Action: Embed & evaluate**

- Regularly reinforce the narrative. This can be done by sharing and celebrating achievements and milestones which demonstrate the progress of the initiative with the community and help to keep the steering committee and volunteers engaged and motivated\(^\text{19}\).
- Regularly seek community feedback on the activities and achievements of the initiative\(^\text{2,20}\).
- Measure and evaluate the progress of the initiative towards its goals. Adapt the initiative based on the evaluations\(^\text{1}\).
- Communicate with wellbeing initiatives in other communities for broader support and develop learning opportunities to share knowledge and experience\(^\text{21}\).
- Try to make mental health and wellbeing part of ‘business as usual’ for community groups and organisations. Assess if the key messages of the initiative are embedded in the culture of the community\(^\text{22}\).

**Result: Sustainability**

*Regularly review and adapt as needed (to align with goals and respond to community feedback on what is needed now)*

This series of actions, or a selection of them, should lead to improvements in the mental wellbeing of the community. A very successful initiative may, in time, build community resilience and empower the citizens to maintain their wellbeing without input from a central leadership group.

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References: