

Healthy Communities, Sustainable Places

The Evidence: Using the arts to deliver the objectives of the Marmot Review

The political context

Improving the health and wellbeing of the population and reducing health inequalities is a key priority for the current government. From April this year the Office for National Statistics (ONS) will begin measuring the wellbeing of the UK population. It has been recognised that it is not enough for governments to drive economic growth, and the collection of this data is aimed at supporting and promoting the population's wellbeing and making informed policy decisions.

Mental health is receiving a significant amount of attention from the government. The new mental health strategy, *No health without mental health* sets out plans to focus greater attention and resources on reducing health inequalities and improving the mental health and wellbeing of the population (DH, 2011).

In terms of health policy, the Public Health White Paper, *Healthy Lives Healthy People* (DoH, 2010) sets out the government's plans to empower local governments to provide services that are tailored to meet the specific needs of their communities, with a particular focus on empowering people to make healthy choices. The government proposes improving the environments in which people live, and 'changing social norms and default options so that healthier choices are easier for people to make'.

In February 2010, the Marmot Review Team published its findings in the report entitled *Fair Society, Healthy Lives* (Marmot, 2010). The report was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Health with the aim of reviewing the evidence base and proposing effective, evidence-based solutions to reducing health inequalities. One of the six key actions identified by the report was to create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities. The key message behind this objective is the need to reduce health inequalities in neighbourhoods and communities and mitigate climate change through sustainable living.

The arts provide a promising approach to reducing health inequalities and promoting wellbeing. This brief report identifies key evidence to support the use of the arts in reducing social isolation and improving community capital; encouraging active travel and physical exercise; and improving the food environment.

The evidence base for arts and wellbeing

There is a growing body of evidence to support the use of the arts in promoting community health and wellbeing. Evidence from research and evaluation supports the

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potential for arts projects in assessing the health needs of communities; improving community health and wellbeing; raising awareness of public health issues; promoting healthy eating; supporting positive parenting, improving mental health and encouraging personal development (Everitt & Hamilton, 2003; ACE, 2007).

Artists are seen to have a unique contribution to make to health promotion within community settings:

'artists instinctively locate their work as having value within a social model of health where improvements in social inclusion and social cohesion are the important indicators which may go on to lead to long-term improvements to the health of the community in which they are working' (Macnaughton, White & Stacy, 2005).

Building social cohesion and community capital

Connecting with others was identified by the New Economics Foundation (nef) as one of the five ways to support personal wellbeing (nef, 2008). Community-based arts projects provide an opportunity for connecting with others and participation in arts activities has been shown to promote social cohesion and build community capital (Newman, Curtis & Stephens, 2003; Kay, 2000).

'Alongside educational benefits, arts interventions are increasingly credited with enhancing social capital, a process which established networks, mutual trust and cooperation within communities for the benefit of all' (Newman et al, 2003).

'The arts have a particular role to play in: encouraging people into training and employment; supporting volunteers and participants in personal development; improving the image of an area; social cohesion and active citizenship; local people recognising their own cultural identity; and improving the quality of people's lives through individual and collective creativity' (Kay, 2000).

The arts also have a significant role to play in promoting social inclusion by engaging hard-to-reach individuals and communities and those who may not respond to more traditional public health initiatives (ACE, 2007).

In addition, the arts have been shown to have a positive impact on community regeneration and development (Jermyn, 2001; Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999).

'Research has suggested that the arts have an important role to play in the regeneration of economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged areas and in supporting community development' (Jermyn, 2001).

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Encouraging physical activity and active travel

Obesity is a significant public health concern within the UK and a key priority is encouraging people to become more physically active. Although research in this area is still in its infancy, there is evidence to support the role of the built environment in facilitating physical activity in both adults and children.

'Buildings, transportation infrastructure, elements of land use and community design, and recreational facilities, such as parks and trails, all affect citizens' physical activity' (Sallis & Glanz, 2006).

The level of physical activity within a community has been linked with access to and attractiveness of recreational facilities (Sallis & Glanz, 2006; Giles-Corti et al, 2005). Artworks in recreational areas encourage the use of outdoor spaces and promote active travel. In a report by the Department for Transport, the artworks commissioned for the Bristol and Bath Railway Path were highlighted as a feature of the path's success in attracting walkers and cyclists.

'A feature in the success of this path has been the ongoing work of the authorities to build additional links and add artworks, seats, drinking fountains and other features' (DfT, 2004).

Improving the food environment

Arts projects provide an innovative approach to improving food environments and encouraging healthy eating habits.

Research has identified the beneficial role that community gardens and allotments play in promoting physical activity and encouraging healthy eating (Sallis & Glanz, 2006). Using the arts to support and promote the use of these spaces could have a significant positive effect on the health and wellbeing of the community.

Community arts projects have also been shown to promote healthy eating by encouraging participants to talk about food; prepare and taste fresh, local ingredients; and develop healthy eating habits (Everitt & Hamilton, 2003).

Delivering the objectives of the Marmot Review

Although this is not an exhaustive list of the available evidence, it highlights the significant impact that community-based arts projects can have in reducing health inequalities and improving the health and wellbeing of communities. The evidence suggests that participation in arts projects can reduce social isolation; improve community capital; encourage active travel and physical activity; and improve the food environment; and in so doing, deliver the objectives of the Marmot Review.

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