

# **Power of the Crowd**

**Annual Public Health Report 2023/24**



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## Foreword

### **James Williams, Director of Public Health Medway Council**

There have been significant global, regional, and local events over the past 3 years, not least the global COVID-19 pandemic and major conflict in Europe. The impact of these events on the Medway community have led me to reflect in this year's annual public health report (APHR) on the strengths and resilience of local people.

The COVID-19 pandemic touched everyone, but we know it caused severe and potentially ongoing physical and emotional harm (Long Covid) to some of our most vulnerable residents. The impact of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has compounded our recovery from the pandemic, increasing economic hardship for many people who were just coming out of the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. The term 'perfect storm' has been used to describe the effects of these issues on those who are most disadvantaged and under resourced within society.

This report will highlight some of the challenges the Medway community has recently faced. It will also celebrate the strengths, resilience and human capital of both residents and the organisations who serve the population of Medway. This last point is important. For people to thrive, they must have an active role in finding solutions to challenges and issues. They must have a real voice and be empowered to inform strategic direction and policies that impact on their health and wellbeing. They have to feel belonging and that they are part of the solution and not simply a 'problem to be fixed'.

It is clear to me through researching and writing this report that Medway possess significant community capital. Initiatives that have required

people to ‘trust each other and believe in themselves’, demonstrates the power of the crowd! Take Medway Can. This initiative was launched to help address the severe effects that being overweight or obese has on our community. Through listening to people and working with them, we co-designed an intervention that I believe is world leading. This programme saw the Medway population come together and travel collectively more than three times around the world in a global challenge to help stimulate weight loss. Obesity and overweight rates are reducing, but more than that, we have ignited a passion amongst our community to use our award winning and extensive community assets. These include our parks and green spaces, heritage sites, urban spaces and schools.

Engaging with local people is essential if we are to achieve a sustainable long-term delivery of community improvement initiatives. For example, the holistic “A Better Medway” service is underpinned by a dedicated one-stop-shop for health situated in Chatham. Located in the heart of the community, this venue serves some of the most under resourced people in Medway. We do however recognise that physical buildings are only part of the solution. The A Better Medway programmes are supported by volunteers ‘Medway Champions’ who have undergone appropriate training. These volunteers lead health and wellbeing walks, they support and signpost people to access specialist support. They are the glue that knits Medway together. An example of their work is in support of action to tackle high blood pressure. This condition is a major cause of death and disability in Medway. It is also an issue that disproportionately affects some of our more vulnerable people, in particular, our ethnic minority populations. Trained volunteer “Hypertension Heroes” drawn from our local ethnic minorities are working right across Medway to

empower people to take charge of their cardiovascular health. This work has led to this initiative being recognised nationally as best practice.

Another example of the benefits of local engagement and Medway Champions is their work on reducing smoking prevalence. Medway previously had one of the highest rates of smoking in the South East of England, it now has one of the lowest. Smoking prevalence for adults aged 18 and over in 2022 was 8.9%, down from 24.2% in 2011<sup>1</sup>. This reduction has only come about through understanding the needs of local people. The Medway Champions, predominantly lay people, drawn from the community and trained to advocate for health improvement, have been pivotal in increasing the uptake of stop smoking services in Medway.

In times of adversity and challenge, one thing that people rely on is access to sufficient suitable nutritious food. The “Medway Food Partnership” reflects our commitment to address food insecurity and promote healthier eating habits in Medway. At the heart of the food partnership, is our aspiration to empower the Medway community to support itself and improve the overall health of the population. Delivering the Medway infant feeding strategy, is a key strand of the Medway Food Partnership. This work is central to our efforts to transform the life chances of infants and young children in our most disadvantaged communities. Our strategies are all informed by insight gained from people with lived experience of the particular issue. Overseeing all of our efforts is the Medway “Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy”. This framework embodies a collaborative approach, uniting all stakeholders to combine efforts to support our community’s health and wellbeing. Medway is a leader in research and development. For the next 5 years we have funding to look at issues that affect our population. Our “Health

Determinants Research Collaboration” will enable Medway Council to ensure all its strategies are informed by sound research, allowing us to make informed decisions.

This annual report is a call for all residents and stakeholders to harness “The Power of the Crowd”. We can build on the sound foundations we have in Medway. Our aim is to harness the community spirit which was so evident during the darkest days of the COVID-19 pandemic. If we can do this, we will be able to create a healthier, more inclusive Medway. This report highlights the benefits of working together and empowering our population. This way of working will make a difference and help efforts to address the health inequalities affecting the life chances of current and future residents of Medway.

## **Councillor Teresa Murray, Portfolio Holder for Public Health and Adult Social Care**

I am delighted to introduce this year's Annual Public Health report which focusses on how much more successful we can be in achieving our ambitions for improving the health and wellbeing for Medway residents when we work together. The partnerships that the council has with our health community and voluntary sector feature prominently in our local Health and Wellbeing strategy which in turn accords with the aims of the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Strategy showing our collective determination to make a difference even in these most challenging times.

I am very proud and humbled by the willingness that a myriad of community groups and volunteers continue to demonstrate when they join with the Council's public health teams to deliver the courses, programmes and interventions that help to support us to eliminate health inequalities and ensure that everyone can enjoy the healthiest life possible for them.

The report contains details of the way that being able to take part in the activities offered and facilitated by our public health teams has changed lives for the better helping to improve physical and mental health as well as reducing isolation and loneliness for many people. Of particular note are the growing popularity of health walks and the huge success of the Hypertension Heroes. Both are very inclusive, reaching people from all ages and backgrounds; and I pay special tribute to the Medway Diversity Forum whose members responded magnificently to encouraging residents from Black and Ethnic Minority communities to come forward and check their blood pressure. This has quite literally saved lives.

It's been great to see the Food Partnership grow stronger working with schools, at festivals and events and in many other community settings to share healthy eating recipes, lead cooking sessions and help those suffering food poverty to access the help they need.

Our continued commitment to research is evidenced by national recognition for this work through the Health Determinants Research Collaboration with findings crucial to our ability to make sure that interventions are targeted where they can have greatest impact and helping to demonstrate that putting prevention at the centre of our work can achieve the sustainable positive health outcomes for the people of Medway.

My grateful thanks go to all of our talented and enthusiastic staff, and those within our partner organisations. The crowd is indeed powerful and continuing to harness that power means that the future is bright.



## Introduction

This Annual Public Health Report focuses on the "Power of the Crowd". It explores the concept that if we invest in our communities, they will come together to look after themselves. This focus on enhancing and nurturing strengths is a community asset-based approach. Through this, they will see sizable health, social and environmental improvements.

Decisions are often made by organisations without talking to the public and understanding their views. This happens, for example, because things can be put into action more quickly. It can, however, lead to challenge from the public. Talking to the Medway community at the beginning of the process can get everyone on board, and contribute to successful services, programmes, and initiatives. There is a lot of evidence that suggests we need to trust our community more.

Local people working together have an extraordinary ability to break cycles of dependency. They can be empowered to create conditions to enable them to take control of their lives and provide for themselves and their families. In Bangladesh, Mohammad Yunus, a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, started up the Grameen Bank which loaned small amounts of money to help people start-up businesses. Through these businesses, people were able to provide for themselves and their families. Although the challenges are different in Medway, the idea of investing in and trusting our community to build on the great things that already happen is important.

Engaging with community members and providing them with tools to further support their family, friends, and neighbours, is key to reducing health inequalities. Inequalities are unfair and avoidable differences in health across the population. To learn about health inequalities and the role they play in Medway, you may wish to read the 2019/2020 Medway

Annual Public Health Report. It explored why some people experience worse health across their life than others. This could be down to a number of things, such as the environment they live in, or their ability to access care. The COVID-19 pandemic helped us learn how we can better involve communities and help them shape their health. This report is about what has been learned, and how this learning is being applied.

This report will provide examples of communities in Medway taking action to support themselves and others. The concept of the “Power of the Crowd” will be central, based on approaches that effectively include and develop the community. These include:

- Giving people a voice so they can have a greater say about their lives.
- Reduction in unfair and avoidable differences in health regardless of who people are or where they live.

Bringing local networks together, referred to as social connectedness, has been shown to lead to better outcomes and healthier communities in times of austerity. The Local Government Association undertook a review and found that a focus on community development led to people remaining independent and staying in their own homes for longer<sup>2</sup>. This type of approach reduces the impact, demand and cost of delivering services to the community.

Community engagement programmes are also effective ways to help change culture. If used appropriately, they can provide support so that local people are better able to adapt to major events impacting on their wellbeing. Research has shown that these programmes were highly effective in changing people’s actions to address issues that directly affect their health and wellbeing. This was specifically seen in

disadvantaged groups who grew in confidence no manage the issues that led to poorer health<sup>3</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a range of social, economic and environmental factors, known as the wider determinants of health, that lead to health inequalities. The pandemic had a greater negative impact on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our community. It is possible that, had there been more effective use and uptake of community engagement interventions at the early stage of the pandemic, the negative impact on these communities would not have been so great.

There is strong evidence that getting involved with the community, for example through volunteering, leads to people feeling better both physically and emotionally. People also improve their self-confidence, self-esteem, and relationships with others<sup>4</sup>. One of the major issues affecting people during the COVID-19 pandemic was social isolation. During this time, many people volunteered to step forward and support the NHS and social care, although this was easier to do for some communities than others. If a national effort was put into place that focussed on supporting people from disadvantaged communities to volunteer, the positive impacts of this community engagement may have been felt more equally.

Medway has learnt a lot from the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, investing early on with simple, preventative, and cost-effective measures centred around engaging and supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged communities will help build community strength. This would include, but is not limited to, the voluntary and faith sectors. All communities will be better able to weather major events in the future. The primary lessons appear to be that investing in simple, low-cost interventions, that are

focussed on engaging and supporting more marginalised communities, will help to build and sustain community coherence. Investing in local people and related voluntary, community and faith sectors organisations will pay dividends should significant shocks of any form occur in the future.

Residents are the life blood of communities. Tapping into the 'Power of the Crowd' will enable people to live longer and healthier lives. This will in turn prevent increased costs related to worsening health conditions in the long term. As our more disadvantaged communities become more engaged, it is likely they will want to get involved even more. We believe this will help narrow the gap in health inequalities across residents in Medway. Our existing prevention programmes will be enhanced and delivered at scale.

The following sections explore and describe different approaches that are in place to support community engagement and development work in Medway.

## **Prevention is better than the cure!**

The benefits of preventing an issue and therefore avoiding or reducing any potential harm before it occurs, has been known for centuries. Although the term prevention can mean different things to different people, it is generally accepted that by not doing something that has been shown to cause harm, any associated risks are reduced. For example, if someone stops smoking, their chance of developing lung cancer falls<sup>5</sup>.

Simply providing people with information does not always lead to changes in opinion or behaviour. The challenge in modern society, with

so many differing viewpoints and easy access to information, is to gain a better understanding of what specific issues are important to an individual. This insight can be used to inform intervention or help determine additional actions.

There are a range of ways to support population health improvement. Within Medway, the 'A Better Medway' Programme, is the vehicle that is used to create the overall environment to help people improve their wellbeing. The following section provides an overview of A Better Medway, with a focus on community engagement.

## **A Better Medway (ABM)**

A Better Medway is Medway's overarching brand that promotes the health improvement function of the Medway Public Health Team. Many services are delivered under A Better Medway that embrace the community asset approach.

### **What is A Better Medway?**

#### **Medway's 'One Stop Shop' for Everything Health & Wellbeing**

[A Better Medway](#) is the overarching brand that promotes the health improvement function of the Medway Public Health Team. The online presence is the 'go to' location for Medway residents looking to make positive changes to improve their own wellbeing, or that of family or friends. In existence for over a decade, A Better Medway has created a wide range of expert support to assist people who need help with issues such as:

- Preventing or dealing with consequences of stroke, heart disease and cancer.
- Stopping Smoking.
- Managing excess alcohol consumption.

- Improvement of mental wellbeing.
- Being able to better deal with workplace challenges.
- Access to sustainable food.
- Obesity and the consequences of physical inactivity.

To provide a trusted community presence, there is a local outreach facility located in Chatham High Street. This means people living in one of Medway's most disadvantaged areas can access face to face support six days per week. They can also access virtual or online support 7 days per week. The facility provides an accessible and visible community location. Although it is preferable that people make an appointment, residents can just drop in. Fully trained staff will assist with any queries. This includes practical support to quit smoking, manage their weight, or get more active. People can also access NHS Health Checks. These are critical to support people who may be unaware they have an issue that could lead to them becoming unwell or dying earlier than expected. At the heart of this model is the community asset-based approach. The 'healthy living shop' provides the foundations through which the communities needs and resources can be best utilised to support them.

### **An Asset-Based Approach to Community Development**

Empowering people so they can make a difference and improve their own health and that of others is at the core of an asset-based approach to community development. In Medway there is a constant programme of outreach and support. Given the diverse nature of the population, including a large military presence, events and interventions are tailored to meet the needs of each part of the community. For example, the challenges faced by serving armed forces personnel, veterans and their families are unique. The 'A Better Medway' team have developed bespoke interventions that build on the considerable local military

community assets in Medway. They undertake dedicated health fayres, supported by statutory and charitable organisations who all have a sound understanding of the military. This approach enables the needs of this part of the community to be met.

Whilst the community outreach approach is not new, Medway's implementation is unique. The increasing diversity of the population in Medway has led to bespoke arrangements being put in place. Working with organisations such as Medway Diversity Forum, local community champions and facilitators have been trained as advocates. These champions engage with voluntary, faith based and statutory services, signposting and facilitating access to support as required. They deliver services and build community resilience to enable residents to take control and make a difference to their lives and that of others.

It is refreshing to note the difference this way of working has had in stimulating people to seek support to improve their health. In 2022:

- Over 7,000 residents contacted Public Health services via the Advice Centre.
- Over 16,000 residents attended A Better Medway public health service in 2022-23.
- Over 7,500 referrals were processed and action by A Better Medway Advice Centre Team
- Over 2,000 people visited the Public Health Advice Centre for a health improvement service.
- Over 2,500 residents attended 11 separate engagement events in 2022.
- Almost 10,000 social media followers (Twitter (X) and Facebook)
- 2.2 million people accessed social media posts in 2022.

## **Medway Health Walks**

### **Public health challenge**

Over the past few years, average ratings of personal wellbeing have declined across England<sup>6</sup>. Physical activity has the potential to enhance wellbeing. Even 10 minutes of brisk walking can increase alertness, energy and positive mood<sup>7</sup>.

### **Public health intervention**

Launched 15 years ago and supported by dedicated Health Improvement Coordinators, Medway has created a number of well-established and successful programmes delivered by highly committed volunteers. These volunteers are responsible for running Wellbeing Walks, Nordic Walking and Cycling Groups. All volunteer walk leaders are provided with bespoke training to safely lead walks.

There are currently 22 public and three private walking groups starting from a variety of Medway libraries, greenspaces and community settings. Walks range in duration between 10-90 minutes to suit all physical abilities. There are also several targeted specialist walks. These include Nordic Walking for Parkinsons Disease, entry level Walks in the Park, Cancer Support Walks and Talk Group and GP surgery-based walks. These sessions are run by local people for local people. This is at the heart of Medway's community assets approach.





Figure 1: Annual walk leader volunteer thank you event.

## Case Studies



Figure 2: Just Beat It Cancer Support Walk and Talk group.

**Sean Spillett, Walk Leader (Cancer Support Walk and Talk):** 'I wanted to start a walking group for people diagnosed, living with, or in remission from Cancer, including their family members.

I wanted a talk and walk group so we could share our experiences together and make new friends. A recent example of why I volunteer; a

new lady joined the group and by the end of the walk she was sharing telephone numbers for future activities. Our walk is open to everyone who would like an outside activity and to meet people.'



Figure 3: **Bob** (right) and **Trevor** (left) Walk in the Park Volunteers

**Bob (Wainscott Walk in the Park):** 'The walks were perfect for me as I used to get breathless on exertion so being able to walk at my own pace and take rests when I needed made me feel more confident. Being in a group was also great because we would chat as we walked which made me forget that I was exercising. The walk gives me something to look forward to, especially as I have made a friend for life in Trevor who joined the walk around the same time as me. We have a great deal in common and have a good laugh.'

**Trevor (Wainscott Walk in the Park):** ‘I have been suffering with chronic knee pain and high blood pressure, so I knew I needed to start being more active but had been putting it off. I was made to feel very welcome, and we set off for our first walk which lasted about 20 minutes and I could stop and rest if my knee was too painful. I do like a good chat and a laugh, and I thought ‘this is right up my street’. I met Bob on the walks, and we are now the volunteer walks leaders for this group which gives me a purpose and a reason to make sure I am there every week. Bob and I have the same sense of humour and we like to ‘put the world to rights’ as we go round. It’s just a shame he supports West Ham!!’

## **ABM Champions**



### **Public health intervention**

The [A Better Medway \(ABM\) Champions](#) programme has created a network of individuals with the knowledge and skills to enable Medway residents to improve their physical and mental wellbeing.

Established in 2014, the ABM programme is underpinned by a comprehensive training syllabus which is accredited by the Royal Society of Public Health. In total, 602 people have completed core modules and specific public health masterclasses. Following assessment, Champions receive a certificate and are able to deliver sessions. They become members of the ABM network, working within their organisations and undertaking outreach with communities.

The ABM Champions Family meets three times a year. These meetings offer Champions the opportunity to share challenges, celebrate successes and work together. In 2022-23, a total of 553 people attended public health masterclasses, updating their knowledge and skills. New Champions were mainly from health and charitable and voluntary organisations.

### **Case Studies**

In 2022-23, the Medway ABM Champions focus was on addressing issues associated with poor physical/mental health and wellbeing. These include social isolation, healthy weight, and physical inactivity. The emphasis was on engaging with diverse groups including male carers, Romanian and Eastern European communities, older adults, and people from black and minority ethnic groups.

A Male Carers Brunch Club participant shared: "The peer group gave me new focus and life." A badminton participant said: "The joy of discovering talents and skills was immense for my self-esteem." Another commented: "Badminton helped me bond with my sons." A weight loss participant noted: "I appreciated the focus and camaraderie." These comments reflect the strength of a community assets approach. Once empowered, people are able to engage with and use, local resources to maintain their health and wellbeing.

### **Future Development**

The primary benefit of the ABM Champions programme is its ability to tap into the skills, passion and commitment of local people. These opportunities are used to engage with some of our more under resourced communities. To maintain and extend this work, there is a

need to ensure enough resources, training, and trust between the Champions and Medway Council is in place.

This latter point is important. Following feedback, the training provided to ABM champions has been updated to enable Champions to address new or emerging challenges affecting the population of Medway.

Champions are now able to pursue flexible "Learner Journeys" where they can attend bespoke training in relation to their specific needs or priority group.

To develop more community capacity and recruit more champions, from within the diverse Medway community, an additional focus has been placed on the use of social marketing to reach out to those who may wish to volunteer in the future.

## **BumpClub**

### **Public Health Challenge**

Established in March 2021, the [BumpClub](#), aims to help women manage their weight whilst pregnant. In 2021/22, 31% and 28% of pregnant people in Medway were obese and overweight respectively. This information is obtained by health care professionals when they assess the pregnant person for the first-time following notification of a pregnancy. Medway had the highest prevalence of obesity amongst pregnant people in the South-East region. Maternal obesity and weight retention post birth are strongly associated with socioeconomic deprivation as well as numerous health risks for both women and baby<sup>8</sup>. The first 1001 days of a child's life (preconception through to infancy and early years) is recognised as a crucial period during which the foundations for future health and wellbeing are built<sup>9</sup>.

BumpClub has been highly commended by national awards and has had a huge impact on local people.

## **Public Health Interventions**

Lots of organisations work together to make BumpClub work. It is focussed on tackling the wider determinants of health that negatively affect maternal and neonatal outcomes.

The focus is on people with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 25 or over. People with a lower BMI (19 or under) who have been diagnosed with, or are at high risk of, gestational diabetes can also access the programme. Gestational diabetes is high blood sugar that develops during pregnancy and usually disappears after giving birth. BumpClub comprises 12 sessions run over a six-week period. Sessions are delivered by qualified experts and cover the following topics:

- Transition to parenthood and the 4th trimester.
- Eatwell guide and portion sizes.
- Meal planning.
- Healthy snacks.
- Behaviour changes and goal setting.
- Introduction of baby to solids.
- Paediatric first aid.
- Physical activity during pregnancy.
- 'Ask a midwife' Q&A.
- Responsive feeding and breast feeding.
- Understanding food labelling.
- Learning to cook a healthy meal with a live 'cook-along'.
- Gestational diabetes.
- Oral health in pregnancy.

- Domestic abuse.
- Mental wellbeing, emotional eating and stress.
- Sexual health.
- Alcohol.
- Sleep.
- Money.

Sessions are held virtually in the evenings. This is so as many people can attend as possible Building on the focus of creating connections and community resilience, people taking part are invited to attend BumpClub walks. These two-mile walks are facilitated twice per week by the Medway Healthy Pregnancy Team.

### **Outcomes**

In the year 2022-2023, the healthy pregnancy team received 49 referrals from midwives and 221 self-referrals from other sources. In total 91 expectant persons attended at least one BumpClub session. In total, 115 healthy lifestyle changes were made and 271 walks covering 542 miles were supported. To visualise just how far this was, the distance was the same as walking from Chatham to Harrogate in Yorkshire and back again. This was a huge achievement. The main benefit of this approach is that people are supported to take part and bond as a group. These new relationships create additional support framework for this community.

In July 2023, it became easier to refer people attending BumpClub to other services. These included services supporting mothers with newborn babies and toddlers. One service encourages responsive feeding, which where a mother responds to her baby's cues as well as

her own desire to feed her baby. Another service supports introducing solid food for toddlers.

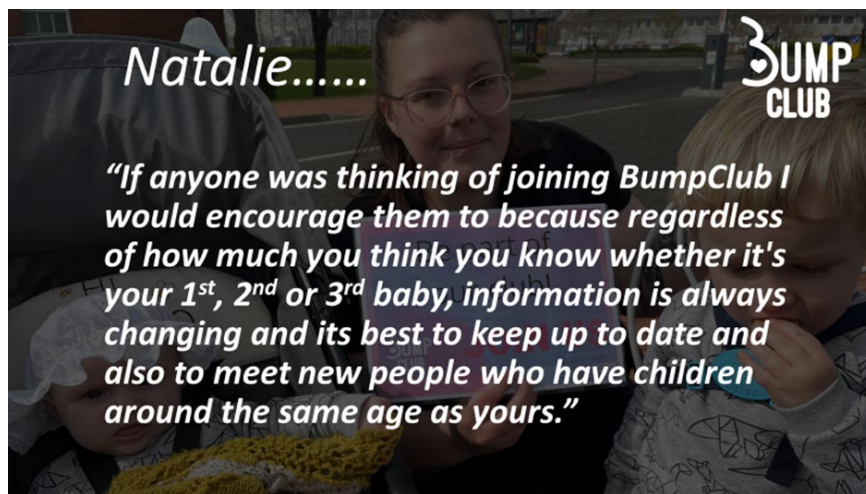


Figure 4: Quote from BumpClub user, Natalie.... "If anyone was thinking of joining BumpClub I would encourage them to because regardless of how much you think you know whether it's your 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> baby, information is always changing and its best to keep up to date and also to meet new people who have children around the same age as yours".



Figure 5: Picture of a recent BumpClub walk.

Here's what our parents say about BumpClub walks:



“Aside from the mental stimulation of talking to other adults, the socialisation for baby has been brilliant. He enjoys playing with his friends while Mummy enjoys a hot drink. The walks are our safe space to discuss any concerns about our little ones with each other, knowing that there is no judgement and only advice from parents who have already gone through it all before.”

## **Workplace Health**

### **Public Health Challenge**

Work occupies a large portion of our lives. Based on the average adult entering the workplace at 18 and retiring at 68, most people will spend 50 years working. Given this considerable time investment, it's important to create healthy work environments that promote employee wellbeing.

There is clear evidence that 'good work', defined as having a safe and secure job with good working conditions, supportive management and opportunities for training and development, improves health and wellbeing across people's lives and protects against social exclusion<sup>9</sup>. In fact, unemployment is bad for health and wellbeing. It is associated with an increased risk of developing health conditions or dying early<sup>9</sup>.

People face different degrees of health inequality depending on their line of work. Factors such as working conditions, job insecurity, access to healthcare, work relationship with colleagues and the work environment hugely impact wellbeing. Many individuals, particularly those with long-term health conditions such as mental health problems, musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions (those affecting joints, bones or muscles) and disabilities, face a barrier to gaining and keeping employment<sup>9</sup>.

## Public Health Intervention

Launched in 2018, the [Medway Healthy Workplaces Programme](#) recognises the profound impact that work has on health and takes a settings-based approach to address this important aspect of life.

Research shows that such programmes boost engagement, improve job satisfaction, enhance mental and physical health, and lead to people being able to go to work more. By investing in employee wellbeing, organisations can foster positive working relationships, reduce stress, and increase job satisfaction<sup>10</sup>.

Workplace health programmes support broader goals of society. These include reducing healthcare costs and promoting a culture of wellbeing. By prioritising employee health, organisations can support the building of healthier communities and enhance the welfare of families and society.



Figure 6: [WHO Health Workplace Framework and Model](#)

The model outlines the health and work cycle – a circular design with following headings: Good worker health, productivity at work, business competitiveness, economic development and prosperity and social

wellbeing and wealth. The section alongside outlines the synergistic benefits for a healthy and happy workforce.

At the heart of the Medway programme is the Workplace Wellbeing Award. Businesses are supported to put in place systems and processes to protect and improve the health and wellbeing of employees. The scheme is open to all Medway businesses regardless of their size or sector. Employers are recruited through a range of methods including direct invitation, member referrals and signposting via the council's business support service. This process is in line with our community assets approach which recognises that at the heart of improving health is the need to create wealth through employment.

As businesses work through the framework, they are assessed and can gain Bronze, Silver, Gold or a Platinum award. Awards are valid for two years before businesses need to repeat the process. The Bronze award consists of 10 standards including an assessment to identify needs of people working there, legal compliance, effective communication tools and senior management support.

After Bronze, businesses identify silver or gold pledges supporting health at work, delivered independently or with the Public Health team at no cost such as:

- Absence and turnover.
- Musculoskeletal health and screening.
- Mental wellbeing and stress.
- Smoking cessation.
- Substance misuse.
- Healthy eating and weight.

- Physical activity and active travel.
- Environment and sustainability.

Through committing to improve their employees' health, businesses become a core part of increasing the communities support network. The advocacy element is central to increasing community resilience. Some of the outputs of this programme are:

- Over 185 local businesses supported with health and wellbeing initiatives.
- Around 45,000 employees taken part.
- 50% of companies have routine/manual workforces and 40% have shift workers.
- 35% are in the most deprived areas.
- Over 300 staff at 70 organisations trained in mental health awareness.
- Over 200 blood pressure checks delivered.
- Over 70 NHS Health Checks and 30 health MOTs delivered.

## **Case Studies**

**Leigh Academy Trust's:** Here, the Human Resources (HR) Manager coordinates their trust-wide wellbeing strategy. This is achieved via a Wellbeing Thrive Group made up of leads of each academy. Activities that improve the health, wellbeing and resilience of staff include a wellbeing support package, in-house Mental Health First Aid training, vouchers for wellbeing activities whilst on leave, onsite activity sessions, an Employee Assistance Programme, and additional signposting for such things as an NHS Health Check.

**London Thamesport** Staff undertake a range of training including mental health awareness (Connect 5), Domestic Abuse Awareness, Healthy Eating, and Substance Misuse. Sessions on cancer awareness and bereavement have also been delivered. A senior manager shared that the Connect 5 training had improved supervisors' skills in starting conversations about health and wellbeing with staff. Achieving the workplace health award had improved cross-department connections and efficiency of the organization.

### **Future Development**

The programme will be adapted to meet the changing challenges facing the workforce. This includes a specific focus on women's health and the menopause. Work is underway in relation to increasing employees ability to deal with grief and bereavement. A new guide for self-employed businesses is being launched.

### **Social Isolation**

#### **Public Health Challenge**

Loneliness and social isolation have a detrimental impact on a person's physical and emotional health. In Medway it's estimated that in the region of 12,399 people aged 16 years and over are often, or always lonely.

## **Public Health Intervention**

The Medway Social Isolation Action Alliance exists to join up key public services, community leaders and local organisations to ensure a ‘whole systems’ approach to supporting the population. Examples of this are:

### **Social Prescribing**

Social prescribing connects people through signposting and referral to activities, groups, or services in the community. The aim is to make sure activities are available that meet the practical, social and emotional needs of the individual. In social prescribing, local agencies, charities, social care and health service personnel, refer people to a social prescribing link worker. These link workers have in depth conversations with people to focus on ‘what matters to them?’ This process leads to a simple personalized care and support plan. The aim of the plan is to help people take control of their health and wellbeing. There are over 30 link workers (social prescribers) based in primary care, community health services, the voluntary sector and social care. Over the next five years Medway aims to have more than 25,000 people access a social prescribing service, with a target of minimum of 12,000 people improving their health and wellbeing.

### **The Talking Tables Project**

This initiative is based on the [national Chatty Café model](#)<sup>11</sup>. The model works through a table in a café being reserved for those who are open to meeting and talking with someone new. The Medway Talking Tables project expands on this concept by collaborating with venues such as churches, libraries, colleges, assisted housing associations, and community spaces where designated areas are established. Each venue is provided with:

- a national Chatty Café license.
- an activity pack as an interactive ice breaker for the table which includes Such things as playing cards.
- support for volunteers facilitating these designated spaces including training and signposting packs.

## **The Medway Together Pledge Campaign**

This aims to raise awareness and reduce loneliness and social isolation by empowering individuals, groups, organisations, and businesses across Medway to make a pledge. These pledges serve to increase connections between people and reduce loneliness (e.g., conversation with a neighbour, hosting a coffee morning or volunteering in their community). Anyone can make a pledge. They can be handwritten on a pledge postcard, or online via a dedicated pledge page on the [Loneliness Hub](#). Once a pledge has been made, the person receives a digital resource pack providing advice on how to spot the signs of loneliness and how to raise the subject with someone. The campaign runs from November 2023 to June 2024. It will finish with an exhibition of pledges, case studies and outcomes. The findings will be showcased as part of Loneliness Awareness week in June 2024.

## **Sahara**

Following a family experience, Paramjot, founder of Sahara, identified a gap in support for elderly South Asians suffering from Dementia. It was clear that a lack of information on what's available, language barriers and lack of knowledge about Dementia and its causes were leading South Asian families to become isolated. Sahara has established:

- A befriending service, matching people with a volunteer to have regular chats.
- Gal Baat, monthly meetings which have covered talks and workshops on various health topics, including cholesterol, dementia, eye health, cancer rehabilitation, reflexology, mental health and arthritis.
- Exercise sessions to build strength and confidence.
- Roti Rangers, meal deliveries for those who struggle to cook at home.
- Walk and talks - monthly walks and a chance to chat.
- Information service - for help with financial information other care information.
- Days out, craft sessions and much more

## **wHoo Cares**

wHoo Cares is a local community interest company. They engage with community members, support and training them to become volunteers. These volunteers go on to support other community members. In 2023 the organisation expanded its support to all those living in the ME3 postcode.

## **Outcomes**

Further evaluations of the projects above are ongoing but here's a snapshot of findings to date.

**The Talking Tables Project:** There are approximately 20 venues across Medway offering support those using their cafés. Work is currently underway to understand the impact of this. Even so, it is a good example of how to best use what is available in the local community.

**Sahara:** In 2022 Sahara received a small community grant that enabled them to run exercise sessions for Sahara members. They named it



Bollywood Fitness. It included well-known music to make the classes both enjoyable and culturally appropriate. Exercises were chair and Pilates-based, making them accessible for the over 60-year-old target group. The programme was delivered in two courses comprising six sessions each. The initial pilot project reached capacity, with 54 participants from South Asian and White backgrounds taking part. Attendees ages ranged from 60s through to 80. Evaluation of the programme found participants had measurable improvements in relation to their physical health. There was also a reduction in pain scores for attendees who were living with chronic pain. Although a relatively small-scale intervention, this type of project is critical to support our engagement work and build community capacity in marginalised groups.

## **Hypertension Heroes**

### **Public Health Challenge**

Detection, management, and treatment of hypertension in Kent & Medway (and England) worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Significant inequalities have negatively impacted people in the most deprived areas and within people from ethnic minority background resident in Medway. It is estimated that approximately 27,911 residents are living with undiagnosed hypertension. In 2021, 195 local residents (82.7 per 100,000 people) under the age of 75 years died as a result of cardiovascular disease<sup>12</sup>. This rate is similar to the National rate with 76 people in every 100,000 dying as a result of cardiovascular disease. Research suggests that 80% of early deaths due to this disease can be prevented<sup>8</sup>. For Medway, that would mean 156 of the deaths in 2021 could potentially have been avoided.

## **Public Health Intervention**

In 2021/2022, the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board (ICB) implemented an initiative to increase blood pressure management within the community. Medway Public Health worked with the ICB to deliver a pilot programme called Hypertension Heroes in Medway.

A multiagency working group was set up involving representatives from the NHS Kent & Medway ICS, the South East Regional Public Health Group, Medway Public Health and Kent and Medway Community Health Trust. Community engagement experts EK360 and the British Heart Foundation were also recruited to help deliver an innovative project focussed on personalised care for participants in Medway.

The project focussed on tackling health inequalities and supporting people's ability to self-manage their high blood pressure. A community asset approach was used which encouraged the volunteers and community organisations involved to work together and achieve these goals.

The key aims of the project were:

- To engage with and raise awareness of the importance of personal management of Hypertension with 1,240 people from identified communities within Medway.
- Empower people who had already been issued with BP monitors to use them and report results of self-management to their GP.
- Engage with and empower people to identify risk factors around hypertension and seek diagnosis if they are undiagnosed.

- To support primary care to address health inequalities and increase personalised approaches of BP monitoring and identification of people at risk.
- To build a skilled and motivated community champion volunteer pool to act as the link between the NHS, social care and local community.

## **Outcomes**

In Kent and Medway, 48 volunteers were recruited and trained to be Hypertension Heroes within their community. The evaluation of the first 6-month phase of the project found:

- 830 people took their own blood pressure reading.
- 30% were identified as having high blood pressure between 140/90 and 179/119 and 10% of 180/120 or higher.
- 62% of participants identified with high blood pressure did not feel confident monitoring their own blood pressure at home.
- At the end of intervention, 93% of participants in Medway said they felt more confident about monitoring their own blood pressure at home in future.

Quantitative and qualitative evidence from participants found that the project reached people who don't usually access their GP:

- 48% of participants in Medway identified as being from a non-white English, Scottish or Northern Irish background.
- Hypertension Heroes delivered sessions in the persons first language if this was not English.

- In Medway 63% lived in an area classified as being in the 20% most deprived households in Medway and nationally. Qualitative evidence indicates that in the pilot:
- 78% of participants increased their awareness and were more motivated to manage their blood pressure.
- 60% of participants expressed a desire to make wider behavioural changes to help reduce their blood pressure.

### **Case study**

When Jenny met the Hypertension Heroes in Medway, her blood pressure reading was very high. Our volunteer Hypertension Heroes suggested that Jenny contact NHS 111 right away, which she did. Jenny was taken by an ambulance and was given medication to reduce her blood pressure, something she never knew she needed. Since taking the medication, Jenny has already seen a significant improvement in her blood pressure.

“You have made a real difference to my life. I did not realise I had dangerously high blood pressure at all. If I hadn’t met the Hypertension Heroes, I wouldn’t have known until it was too late.”

Since meeting our Hypertension Heroes, Jenny has made changes to her lifestyle. Some of these lifestyle changes include exercising more and trying to stay stress free. The Hypertension Heroes signposted Jenny to the Kent Association for the Blind so that she could get support for dealing with a visual impairment and gain more independence. She told us that this has been invaluable, and she felt confident that her health is improving as a result. All of public feedback was positive.

‘It was brilliant to have things so well explained; now I understand the markings on the BP cuff and how the machine works.

‘Now I understand about hypertension, and so does my community; we can help people look after themselves’.

‘It’s great that I could talk to people in my own language and do this’.

‘I was worried about doing the test, but I felt so at ease with the volunteer. I am so grateful for the opportunity to learn and check my blood pressure’.



Figure 7: BP and Height and Weight Engagement outreach session in Gillingham High Street

## Medway Can

Medway Can is a behaviour change campaign focussed on tackling obesity and overweight. The aim is to get Medway moving and record the distance so that our community could work together to travel a distance equivalent to once around the world. Since launch, the people of Medway have travelled around the world not once, but three times!

### Public Health Challenge

Obesity is a major cause of premature mortality and morbidity and tackling it is a priority in Medway. In 2021 to 2022, 67.2% of adults (aged 18 and above) were overweight or obese in Medway, which is higher than the South-East percentage (62.7%)<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, 2022/23 data shows that 22.4% of children (aged 4-5 years old) and 37.3% of children (aged 10-11 years old) are overweight or obese in Medway<sup>14,15</sup>. In children, this can lead to significant physical and mental health challenges, including type 2 diabetes, anxiety and depression and poor oral health<sup>16</sup>.

### Public Health Intervention

#### Medway Can Healthy Weight Campaign

Launched in 2022, [Medway Can](#) is a behaviour change campaign focussed on tackling obesity and overweight. The primary focus is to engage and empower a minimum of 25% of Medway residents to adopt healthy eating practices and be more physically active. Whilst inclusive, the campaign prioritises locality and community groups with the highest obesity rates. Medway Can also involved a range of key stakeholders as well as residents. These included education providers, voluntary/community and faith sector leaders, health and care

professionals, local employers, food and retail outlets, and physical activity providers.

A key call to action was to engage people who live, work and study in Medway to log their activities with the aim to move Medway around the world. The logging took place via a dedicated website. In line with the focus on building local sustainable community capacity, an array of resources and activities were created to meet the needs of participants. There were three phases or stages to the programme. Stages one and two focussed on physical activity, whilst stage three brought in a healthy eating aspect. Momentum was built in our education settings with schools really engaging to help address the obesity and overweight challenges in children and young people. Schools initiated challenges to see who could log the most miles. Wider community engagement activity was driven using bespoke marketing events, involving social and wider media (online, radio, TV print etc.). It was heartening to see how many people were motivated to take part in Medway Can related promotions. These included things such as the daily mile in schools, as well as workplace and other challenges.

### **Medway Can Fund**

Critical to any intervention focussed on building community capacity is the need to invest so that appropriate resources are available to deliver the outcomes. We found that small grants have been able to make a significant difference to the local infrastructure in Medway.

When launching the Medway Can Healthy Weight Campaign, a small fund was set aside. This too, allowed local charities and non-profit organisations to bid so that they could create campaign awareness within their local communities. This campaign fund was up to the value

of £800. Organisations bidding for this resource were required to demonstrate how any activity they undertook would support the achievement of the campaigns priorities. They also had to ensure proposals were in line with Medway Council's climate change priorities. These require any intervention leaves a long terms sustainable legacy within the community or the organisation. In 2022, six organisations were commissioned to deliver a series of 12-week programmes. These organisations were:

- Anchor Support
- WHoo Peninsular Cares
- Nigerian Community
- Medway Diversity Forum
- Sisu Fit
- Street Soccer

### **Building Community Capacity**

A total of £20,525 was awarded to support community delivery. This resourced 30 different activities to engage Medway adults and children to use the Medway Can Website and move Medway around the world. Activities included cookery sessions for families led by expert chefs. These sessions introduced people to healthier foods and new techniques to cook and prepare nutritious food on a budget.

It's estimated that the community funding has benefitted over 1,500 children and adults so far. Over 114 adults enrolled the programme, with 73 adults completing the programme, 42 adults losing some weight, and nine adults losing 5% body weight. At a rough cost of £16 per person this is a very good return on investment.



Across the 30 activities there was a wide variety of the diverse Medway population involved. This included Afro-Caribbean, Nigerian, Asian, Slovak and Romanian ethnic communities. Applications were received from schools for growing projects that involved both parents of school children and members of local elderly residential care homes. This specific initiative really helped to cross the generational divide.

Further community development activities included allotment growing for stroke survivors, tea dances, running clubs, artistic swimming, handball clubs and beach days out for disadvantaged groups. At the heart of these sessions was the sharing of knowledge and empowering people to do something positive for themselves and share this with their families and friends.

Investing in training and upskilling volunteers has led to Medway Can creating a lasting legacy. These new connections mean there will be an ongoing programme of community activity. This means that Medway's residents will continue to benefit for the foreseeable future. The Medway Can website will remain a source of trusted information allowing residents to log their group activities for free and keep Medway moving around the world.

## **Testimonials**

Here are a few snippets of the many positive comments received:

“Thanks to the Medway Can Fund, Medway Diversity Forum delivered 26 weekly Badminton sessions to 12 Black and Minority Ethnic men, women and young people, 75% of who had BMI over 25. We were able to make positive intervention in people's lives, especially those

recovering from the pandemic, allowing them to take actions and ownership of their wellbeing.”

“Our project is going really well. Not only do we have our chickens who are producing eggs, last week we actually got the compost into our raised beds, ready for planting. We have been working with our wonderful PTA, as well as the parents/carers in our school community to get this up and running, and we can't wait to see what produce our children are going to grow over the rest of this school year!” (Sara, Rivermede Trust).

“We calculated that during the day each participant took part in 3 hours of moderate exercise which equated to 8.2 miles per person. Therefore, in total, families that attended completed a total of 836.4 hours of moderate exercise during their day at the Beach!” (Homestart Medway, Beach Day out to Joss Bay).

"Our project brings together students, parents and staff. We can't wait to see the produce grown and the impact on healthy eating knowledge." (A school that took part).

“Linda has mental health challenges and difficulty speaking. She was an unlikely character to join the programme but was very engaged from the beginning. Often shy in other groups that she attends, Linda quickly gained confidence with the group and interacted well with the sessions. Although Linda usually eats the meals provided by the supported living where she resides, her goal was to cook more often for herself. Linda chose to cook twice a week herself and thoroughly enjoyed the independence of cooking her own meal occasionally. Linda has limited mobility and walks with a frame however reports that she is more active

since engaging in the programme.” (Course facilitator, reflecting on a service user.)

“Michelle has underlying health conditions that were preventing her from working and driving. Michelle reported that she lived with pain and that it affected her day-to-day life and mental health. Michelle was a confident participant and was very supportive to the rest of the group. Michelle engaged in a cooking class soon after the first session and is now cooking for herself most days. She is exploring plant-based foods and has varied her diet. Michelle’s main achievement is the activity she engaged in. Michelle began swimming a few times a week and set herself a goal of achieving 100 lengths of the pool. By the 12th session she was on 90! By approx. week 8, Michelle was given all clear to drive again and by the end of the programme the doctor has told her she is able to go back to work part time. Although Michelle did not lose weight this could be down to muscle development following her new activity programme?? Michelle is also going to sign up with wHoo Cares as a volunteer. Overall, the programme has had a significant positive influence on her life.” (Course facilitator, reflecting on a service user.)

### **Co-Production of Medway Can**

The Healthy Weight Campaign was co-produced with residents through primary research. This included a 1,500-resident survey followed by co-design workshops with young people and stakeholders. In total, 52 residents took with a total of 30 being children aged 10-11 years old. In each workshop, participants discussed:

- Barriers and facilitators to weight management behaviours such as diet and physical activity.

- Ways in which people might be motivated to adopt healthier weight-related behaviours.
- Types of messages that might improve motivation and how they might differ for different audiences.
- View and appraise campaign materials and visual aids looking at language use, colour, imagery, icons, and campaign names.

The following recommendations are based on the findings of the thematic analysis and were incorporated into the campaign's further development:

1. Avoid risk-avoidance messages but focus on the positive wellbeing elements, specifically feeling 'happier' and having more 'energy'.
2. Avoid "challenge" and competition.
3. Focus on the family, particularly children as powerful messengers.
4. Show and encourage leaders making changes to create positive social norms (e.g., CEO/MD using standing desks).
5. Bright and vivid colours are appealing to most audiences.
6. Use local people and places.
7. Smiling, positive images of people are appealing.
8. Use messaging (e.g., strapline) that will appeal to people who have an affinity with the local area and those who don't by using a mix of prefixes such as "I, we, you, Medway." This may also offer benefits in appealing to a wider audience.
9. Take a strength-based approach to messaging - regardless of the audience, everyone has something to offer.
10. Avoid a focus on appearance - seen as off-putting to audiences.
11. Ensure all messaging is inclusive of disability, culture, age, and gender by using relevant people and places.

12. Consider using humour - whilst humour is subjective, people are likely to remember messages and feel less criticised and defensive. Humorous messaging is also likely to gain attention, lead to information retention and buffers for potential negative emotions that otherwise might be elicited.
13. Barriers elicited - lack of motivation and time, competence, and awareness. Messaging should focus on the small easy steps that can be taken despite these barriers –
  - a. We don't need to spend hours in the gym, walking is enough.
  - b. Looking after yourself is looking after your family.
  - c. By being active, you'll have more energy to enjoy other things in life.

This collaborative and co-developed approach helped shape the positive, adaptable "Medway Can" name, brand and strategy.

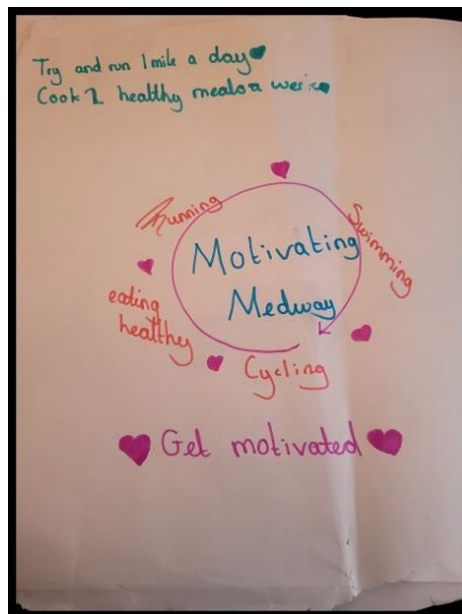


Figure 8: "Motivating Medway" Year 6 Pupil when asked to think about messaging that they might find appealing.



Figure 9: Humorous message suggested by Year 6 Pupil "Get off the sofa, these foods need you!"

## Outcomes

Some key campaign outputs included:

- 80,730 collective miles logged which is more than three times around the world.
- 60,000 website visitors, with 2,667 logging activities.
- 84,000 social media engagements
- Over 2.6 million social media impressions
- 2,000 people engaged at various Medway Can events about physical activity, healthy weight or healthy eating in the Pentagon Centre, Strood and other venues.
- 67 schools reached which includes 10,000+ children/staff.
- Over 1,500 engaged through 30 community chest projects.

Working through organisations, especially schools, was critical - their burst of logging circled the world in just four weeks! The community chest also reached groups who were hesitant to engage with public campaigns.

## Medway Food Partnership (MFP)

### Public Health Challenge

The Department of Health defines food poverty or household food insecurity as 'The inability to afford or to have access to food to make up a healthy diet'<sup>17</sup>. It can be triggered by a crisis in finances or a change in personal circumstances. Some factors that have worsened food poverty in Medway include the dietary health crisis and climate crisis. 'The COVID-19 pandemic also had a big impact on people. Many people were not able to work during the pandemic which challenged household budgets'. Post pandemic recovery has also been impacted by international events including the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. There are a range of social, economic, and environmental factors that impact on the public health. These factors are influenced by the local, national, and international factors which shape the conditions of our daily life. The wider determinants of health influence an individual's well-being and overall health outcomes. One crucial aspect among these determinants is the cost of living. The cost of living refers to the expenses required to maintain a certain standard of living, including housing, food, transportation, healthcare, and other necessities. Therefore, it is an important focus when looking to plan interventions to build community capacity and resilience.

Rising food prices and the concentration of unhealthy food outlets in disadvantaged areas contribute to food insecurity. Food insecurity refers to limited or uncertain access to nutritious and culturally appropriate foods. This can lead to poor dietary choices, malnutrition, and a higher prevalence of diet-related diseases like obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular conditions. Rising food prices particularly affect low-



income households because they spend a larger proportion of their income on groceries than average.

## Public Health Intervention

In July 2021 an independent review was published that focussed on establishing a vision and plan for a food system in the UK. The UK Government responded to this review with a national 'strategy' which was released in June 2022. The focus of this strategy is to eradicate food poverty. Local government and associated organisations have a key role to play to deliver the ambitions.

The [Medway Food Partnership](#) was launched in November 2021 to bring together local businesses, organisations, and residents. The vision is to create an environment that enables local people to access healthy food. . It also aims to make sure residents have the knowledge and skills to support themselves and their families. This will help to build healthier communities and better futures for everyone in Medway. The partnership currently consists of approximately 140 members with a key focus on:

- Poverty, food security and emergency food support
- Healthy food for all, education and skills
- Climate change and the environment
- Business and procurement
- Oral health.

## Outcomes

Some achievements of the food partnership include:

- Creating two new Eatwell Guides tailored for South Asian and African-Caribbean communities to help them eat a healthy and balanced diet (figure 10).

- Developing an Oral Health Strategy with local partners and groups to improve the oral health of Medway's most vulnerable residents.
- Working with local businesses and organisations to establish a Water Refill Scheme. This programme aims to reduce plastic waste and encourage people to refill their water bottles. So far 64 businesses have signed up to the scheme.
- Supporting schools to achieve the Food for Life Award. This recognises excellence in food education, school meals and food culture.
- Launching the Medway Breastfeeding Peer Support Network which provides information, advice and support to breastfeeding mothers.
- Medway Council has signed up to the Sustainable Food Places Awards. This scheme recognises and celebrates the success of places in the UK taking a joined-up, holistic approach to sustainable and healthy food.
- Distribution of food parcels to under-resourced and needy residents (figure 11).

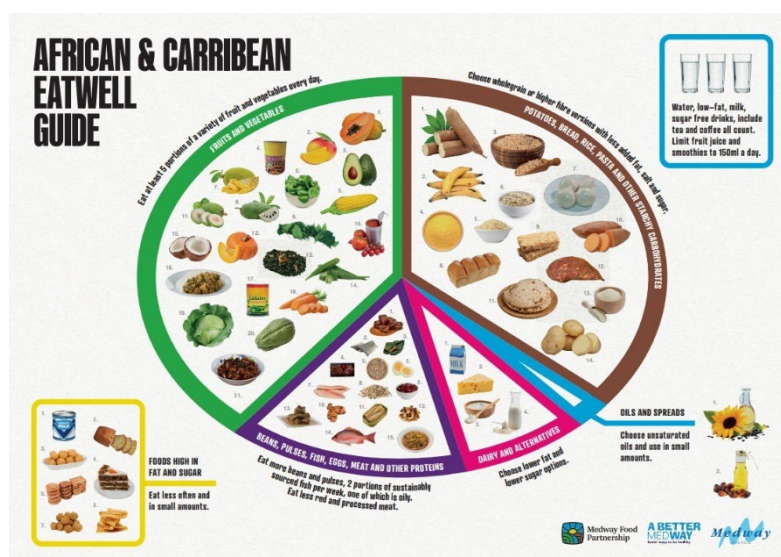


Figure 10: MFP African & Caribbean Eatwell Guide

A pie diagram outlining the relative portion sizes of more fruit & vegetables, more whole grains and starchy carbohydrates, less meats and dairy and even less fats, oils and spreads.

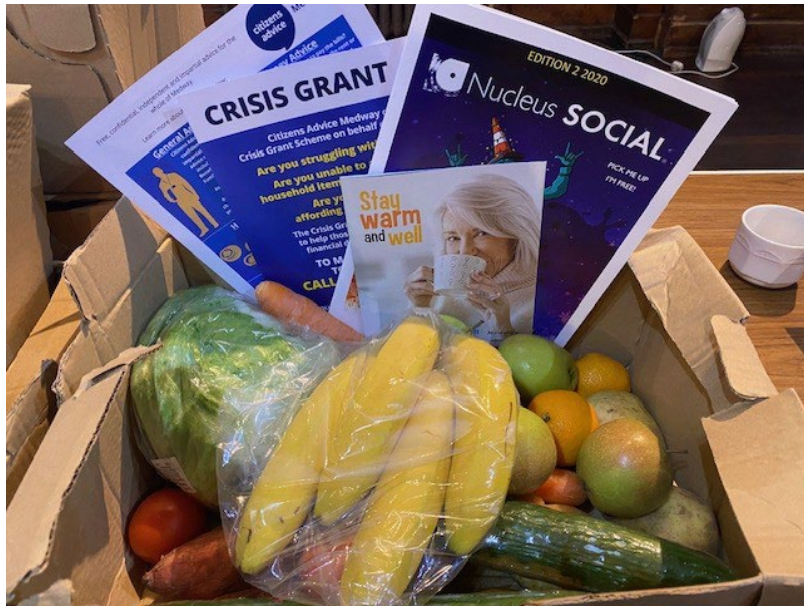


Figure 11: MFP Food Parcels

## **Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy (JLHWS)**

### **Why we need a Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy**

The Health and Social Care Act 2012 places a legal duty on Medway Council to work in partnership with the NHS and other stakeholders to produce a Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy (JLHWS). This strategy acts as the blueprint for improving health and wellbeing for everyone living in Medway. It is therefore one of the primary means available to establish community engagement and shape the way in which community development is undertaken in Medway. The JLHWS sets out a comprehensive set of priorities to inform decisions about the commissioning of health and care services for the current and future Medway population.

### **Co-Production of Medway's JLHWS**

The strategy's themes and priorities rely on evidence relating to Medway's health and wellbeing needs by drawing on the views and perceptions of residents. This approach makes sure that the strategy accurately reflects the wants, needs, and aspirations of our population. It also considers and identifies areas where specific improvements can be made.

The gathering of insights from Medway residents was carried out in a varied and inclusive way. An important priority was to capture the voices of different groups within our communities. Effort was made to gain the trust and insight from those who suffer from the greatest health and wellbeing disadvantages. These people often don't participate in engagement exercises. With this in the mind, the engagement process actively looked to hear from residents living with mental health conditions, those experiencing homelessness, older people, vulnerable adults, minority groups, those serving in the armed forces, and people

with long term health conditions. Care was taken to include the views of children and young people as well as organisations that make up the voluntary, charitable, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector. It was also important to engage with organisations responsible for delivering services to the population. This included colleagues in health and care provider organisations as well a staff working across local government departments.

The approaches taken to gather insights included online surveys, focus groups, and one-to-one interviews. The reach of the engagement work was extended via a community **asset- based approach** which used:

- Libraries
- Medway Diversity Forum
- Parenting support groups
- Healthwatch Medway
- VCFSE organisations
- Parish councils
- Faith groups
- Social groups set up by community volunteers.

The online surveys yielded a strong response and were supplemented by focus groups and one-to-one engagement exercises which saw an additional 34 residents participating. The methodology used was comparable with the population profile and response levels of the 2021 Census. The distribution of and representation of respondents by age, gender and ethnicity was also similar to the 2021 Census.

## Key Findings

Analyses revealed that around half of adult respondents had a long term physical or mental health condition or illness that was expected to last 12-months or more. This compared to 36% of children and young people who answered 'yes' to the same question.

Findings from the engagement work highlighted that on a personal level, people valued emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing. In terms of priority order for adults, greater importance was attributed to feeling happy and experiencing less worry (figure 12).

When asked for views about future priorities for health and wellbeing, adults said that having enough money to provide for their own or family's needs was the most important. The next most important issue was having access to GPs and other health and care services. The next issue was affordable good quality housing and improved job security.

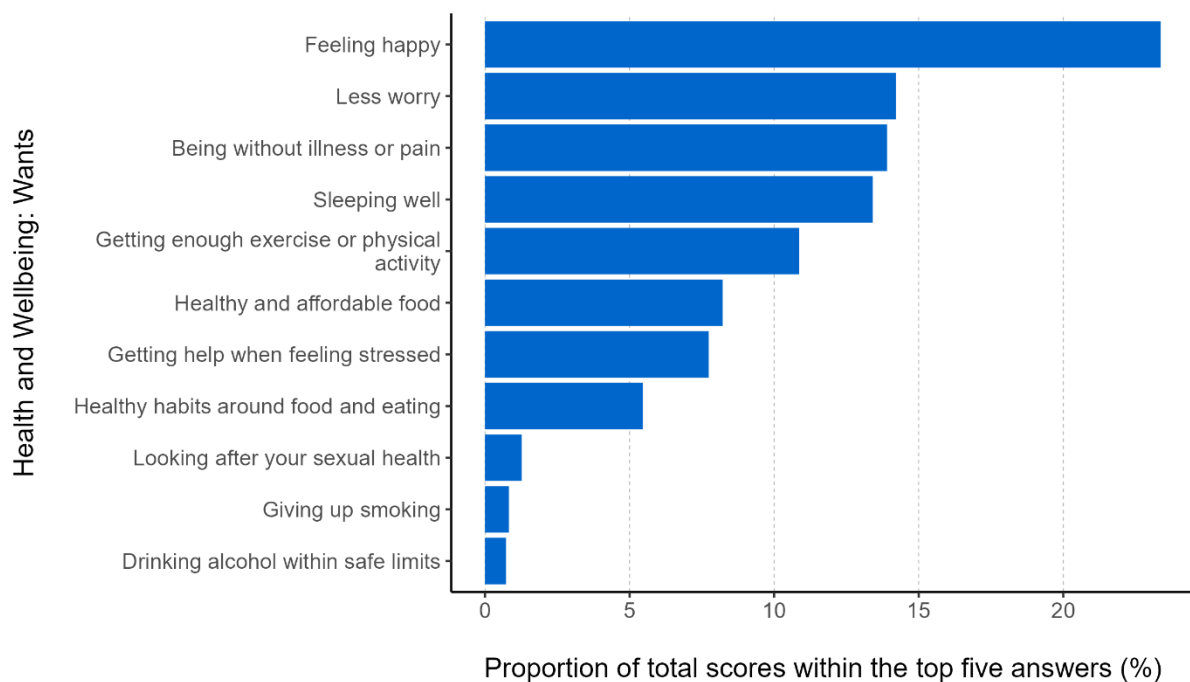


Figure 12: Bar plot of results from the ‘Better Health Adult Survey’ showing what Medway residents want when considering their own health and wellbeing. The top 5 answers being – feeling happy, less worry, being without illness or pain, sleeping well, and getting enough exercise or physical activity.

In contrast, for children, help with mental health needs was the most important thing that could be done to improve their health and wellbeing. Children wanted to spend more time socialising and doing more physical activities. They also wanted better access to green spaces, and a focus on tackling environmental issues (figure 13).

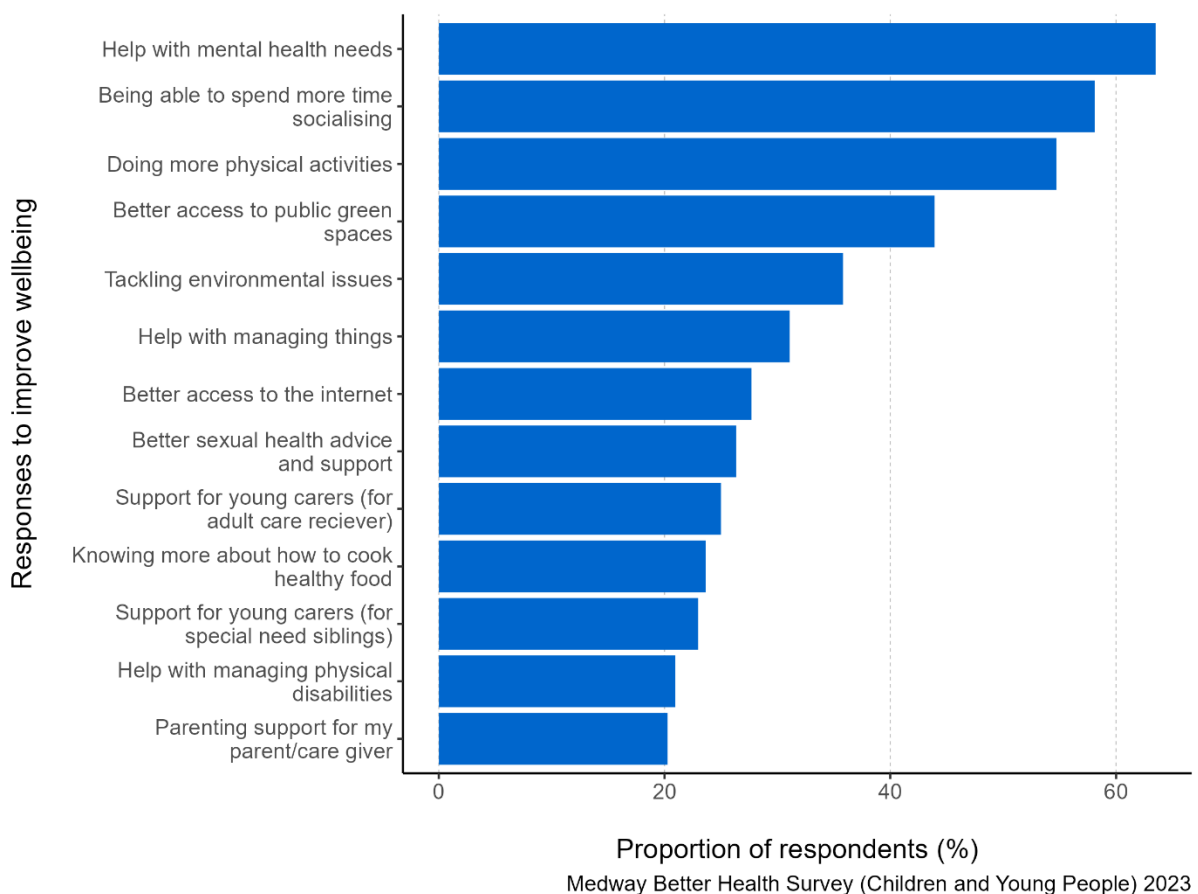


Figure 13: Bar plot of results from the ‘Better Health Children and Young People Survey’ showing what children and young people in Medway

think would improve their health and wellbeing. The top 5 results from the survey were health with mental health needs, being able to spend more time socialising, doing more physical activities, better access to public green spaces, tackling environmental issues.

## Outcome

The rich insights gathered have led to the development of four key themes for our refreshed JLHWS. There are also a set of associated sub-themes. This new strategy will enable us to create the foundations to deliver the changes our residents have said they need to happen to improve their lives (figure 14).

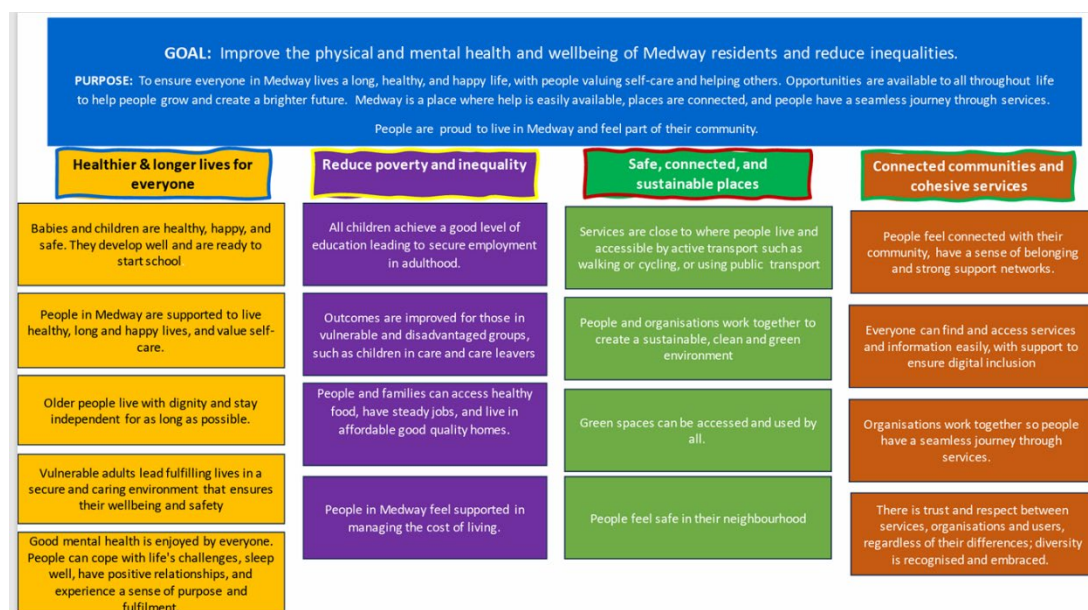


Figure 14: Summary of what residents have told us is important to them.

The goal: Improve the physical and mental health and wellbeing of Medway residents and reduce inequalities. The following headings were used.

- Healthier and longer lives for everyone.
- Reduce poverty and inequality.



- Safe, connected, and sustainable places.
- Connect communities and cohesive services.

Measuring success in the field of health and wellbeing is not straightforward. There are often so many other factors it can be difficult to identify what has made a difference. Medway is fortunate to be in position where we are able to rigorously measure what things work and why.

## **Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC)**

### **What is the Health Determinants Research Collaboration?**

Research plays a vital role in informing action to improve the health and wellbeing of the population. Funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) a research organisation since 2006, the Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) are collaborations between local authorities and universities to help local authorities become more research active. The aim is to create a culture of evidence-based decision making within local government.

### **Medway Health Determinants Research Collaboration**

In September 2023, Medway Council was awarded a 5-year, £5 million funding grant to become an HDRC. HDRC Medway is a new initiative between Medway Council, University of Kent and the people of Medway. Medway was the first area in the South-East of England to be awarded HDRC status.

## Co-Production in Research

### **Public Advisory Group (PAG)**

Public involvement is central to HDRC Medway. The Public Advisory Group (PAG), a group which forms part of Medway's HDRC Team, includes residents who are passionate about using research to tackle health inequalities. Another important and equal member of Medway's HDRC Team is the Lay Co-Applicant who represents community voices at the executive level. With lived expertise on challenges like mental health, substance misuse, and homelessness, they ensure relevance and build trust. They also guide discussions and inform our local strategy as well as use a community lens to contribute to the development of joint project plans. Additionally, they identify research priorities, communicating findings, and evaluating progress.

### **Shared Principles of Communications and Engagement**

HDRC Medway has developed a communications and engagement strategy in direct partnership with Medway's residents, VCFSE organisations and elected members who are advocates for the community. Figure x provides an overview of the principles that people told us the HDRC must abide by when engaging or communicating with local residents.

We will build on our early success and use a number of approaches to build trust and capacity. As the HDRC programme develops, the communications and engagement strategy will evolve. Figure 15 shows the principles of HDRC communication and engagement.



Figure 15: The Principles of HDRC communication and engagement.

The diagram is broken down into the following sub-headings and then descriptions after.

- **Be clear, interesting, and relevant:** use easy to understand language, use a broad range of communication approaches, make messages relevant to people's lives.
- **Be transparent:** share information about activities, be open about decision making processes, provide updates on research involvement outcomes.
- **Be visible:** maintain a presence within the council, engage at public events, use diverse communication methods.
- **Work through trusted community organisations:** offer opportunities for involvement, provide accessible information.

- **Promote trust and collaboration:** develop and maintain relationships, value all contributions, foster mutual respect.
- **Avoid repetition:** collaborate across departments, minimise duplication.
- **Offer and promote learning:** build confidence and skills, deepen understanding beyond the programme.
- **Involve communities and staff in decision-making:** engage at every stage of the research cycle.
- **Reflect on impact and practice:** continuously improve communication and engagement.

## Conclusion and recommendations

This annual report has focussed on describing the benefits of using a community engagement and asset-based approach in Medway. The evidence is clear, if we invest in our communities, they will look after themselves. The initiatives and programmes outlined in this Annual Public Health Report on Power of the Crowd, highlight the strengths of listening to people, working with them and supporting them to use the range of local resources that are readily available. Intergenerational programmes, such as Medway Can, have connected older and younger generations in ways that will continue into the future. There have also been significant outcomes from the Medway Can initiative. Measurable reductions in the rates of obesity in children entering reception and Year 6 have been noted. We believe that the holistic, family focussed approach has assisted in this regard.

This report has highlighted the willingness of local people to 'step up' and support each other. Through pump priming voluntary and charitable groups with relatively small grants, we have seen community capacity

grow in our most disadvantaged areas. We know that this approach works. Supporting people to gain the knowledge and skills to eat well on a low budget, will help them feed and sustain their families in times of difficulty.

It is important, however, that we can fully measure the benefits of any interventions we put in place. For example, how do we measure the true impact of social prescribing? Do our Chatty Cafe's reduce social isolation and improve the mental health of participants? Are we adding value through our wider regeneration and renewal programmes to build community capacity?

The Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy provides the framework to inform our work. The Health Determinates Research Collaborative will allow us to monitor and measure whether we have achieved our desired outcomes.

The use of a community assets approach has the power to transform lives. The following recommendations serve to support action to embed these principles into the culture and practise of all those working to enable Medway's community to achieve its full health, social and environmental potential.

### **Recommendations:**

- Multi-sectoral collaboration to improve health and wellbeing should be informed by the principles of community development, in particular an assets-based approach.
- The Medway Health and Wellbeing Board should receive an annual update setting out progress on capacity building and the

empowerment of community members as champions, volunteers, advisors, and advocates as part of the A Better Medway Champions programme.

- All stakeholders responsible for the commissioning or provision of services to the population of Medway- should utilise a needs-based approach to service delivery. They should tailor interventions and support to priority groups in line with recommendations set out in the Medway Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), NHS England Core20Plus5 Inclusion Health Framework.
- Those working with marginalised and under resourced communities should review and reflect on whether to adopt the innovative communication and engagement campaign and models utilised by the Medway Can, Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy Refresh and Health Determinates Research Collaboration programmes.
- A robust evaluation framework to guide continuous improvement should be put in place at the scoping stage of an initiative. This will help support our overall aspirations to use the Medway HDRC to help capture and share our learning.

## Afterword: An update on the recommendations in the 2021/22 Annual Public Health Report

### APHR 2021/22 - Hypertension: Tackling the Silent Killer

The last Annual Public Health Report focused on the major public health challenge of hypertension, which 1 in 4 adults in England live with. The report set out the current measures relating to prevention, early detection, and effective treatment of high blood pressure, and included several recommendations for further action. These included:

- Preventing hypertension by supporting residents to make healthy lifestyle choices, such as quitting smoking, regular physical activity, and healthy eating.
- Finding people who are undiagnosed with high blood pressure, as early intervention and treatment are critical to avoid major health conditions such as heart and circulatory disease.
- High quality treatment to be provided by health and care professionals once hypertension has been diagnosed.
- The health and care system to continue to prioritise reducing health inequalities and tackling the wider determinants of health, due to specific population groups being more commonly affected by hypertension.

The last report detailed how smoking increases the likelihood of hypertension and I am pleased to say that Medway has seen some excellent progress on adult smoking prevalence. The Integrated Household Survey reports annual data on smoking prevalence across the country with Medway's latest prevalence reported as 8.9%. This is the lowest on record and is significantly lower than the England average which is 12.7%. Smoking rates have halved over the last 7 years in

Medway but there is still more work to do to fully eradicate this major cause of premature death and disability. Rates of smoking are still too high in routine and manual workers and people living with a mental health condition. We must continue to focus on supporting these groups.

The NHS Health Check programme aims to reduce the risk of heart attacks, stroke and dementia in people aged 40-74 years. It is an important tool in the early detection of undiagnosed high blood pressure. The most recent data shows that Medway ranks second out of 19 councils in the South East Region, for eligible adults who have received an NHS Health Check. This programme's success means more than 26,000 people may have attended and received a lifesaving health check over a five-year period. In addition to the NHS Health Check Programme, the Public Health department has been working with local communities, attending events and local high streets to encourage people to 'Know Their Numbers'. Over the last 12 months we have measured the blood pressure of more than 1,000 people. We have offered tailored advice to help people improve their lifestyle and referred some people for specific treatment where necessary.

The last report highlighted the excellent collaborative Hypertension Heroes project. This project aims to reach communities with the poorest health outcomes. It is focussed on improving diagnosis and treatment rates of high blood pressure using specially trained local community champions. This programme received national recognition for its impact. In November 2023 it was a finalist in the Health Service Journal awards within the 'Innovation and Improvement in Reducing Healthcare Inequalities' category.



Following the last annual report, the Kent and Medway Integrated Care System has identified reducing hypertension as a core priority within the Inequalities Prevention and Population Health Programme. This committee receives regular updates on progress against a number of short-and long-term actions that aim to prevent, detect and treat high blood pressure. The actions are spread across the health and care system including primary care improving their treatment to target rates and the community pharmacy pilots rolling out hypertension case finding services. Across Kent and Medway 36 Community Pharmacy leads have been recruited out of the 42 Primary Care Networks.

## Glossary

**Community:** A community is often a geographical area (e.g., local government region or town). It can also be defined on shared interests, identity or characteristics (e.g., LGBTIQ).

**Community Development:** A process where community members take collective action on issues important to them. This holistic, bottom-up approach is grounded in principles of empowerment, human rights, inclusion, social justice, self-determination and collective action and impacts positively at both individual and community levels. Children and families benefit from an increase in skills, knowledge, empowerment, self-efficacy and experience enhanced social inclusion and community connectedness (Ife, 2016). At a community level, changes in social capital, civic engagement, social cohesion, community safety and improved health are observed (Haldane et al., 2019; Ife, 2016; Kenny & Connors, 2017). For example, the Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy (discussed further in the report) includes community development where residents, Councillors and other local stakeholders

were engaged through interviews and focus groups to ensure the strategy serves the community's needs.

**Participatory Model:** Also known as participatory approach, it's a model/approach where everyone with a stake in the intervention has a voice, either in person or by representation. This includes staff that deliver it, target population members, community officials, interested citizens, and people from involved agencies, schools, and other institutions. Everyone's participation is welcomed and respected, and the process shouldn't be dominated by any individual, group, or single point of view.

**Co-production:** Also known as co-design and co-creation depending on context, co-production is an equal relationship between people who use and are responsible for services<sup>18</sup>. They work together, from design to delivery, sharing strategic decision-making about policies and decisions about the best way to deliver services. The Care Act 2014 specifically includes the concept of co-production in its statutory guidance; Local authorities should, where possible, actively promote participation in providing interventions that are co-produced with individuals, families, friends, carers and the community<sup>19</sup>. Detailed further in the report, the Public Advisory Group and Lay Co-Applicant within Medway's Health Determinants Research Collaboration is an example of co-production at work.

**Asset-based Approach:** Also known as asset-based community development (ABCD), this is a community development approach that begins the development process by identifying and building on a community's 'assets' rather than needs. Assets include physical spaces, skills, local knowledge, groups, associations and networks as well as

financial resources. Detailed further in the report, 'A Better Medway' uses this approach to deliver and promote a wide range of public health projects through already existing events, local spaces, and local groups. Some of these include Armed Forces Day, Freshers Fayre.

## Abbreviations

ABM	A Better Medway
NHS	National Health Service
DPH	Director of Public Health
PH	Public Health
BME	Black Minority Ethnic
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
NIHR	National Institute for Health Research
HDRC	Health Determinate Research Collaboration
PAG	Public Advisory Group
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Intersex, Questioning
JLHWS	Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy
PPIE	Public and Patient Involvement Engagement
KTE	Knowledge Transfer and Exchange
MHWP	Medway Healthy Work Place
HR	Human Resources
UK	United Kingdom
VCFSE	Voluntary Community Faith and Social Enterprise

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