Communicating about the building blocks of health

Five practical tips for local government

Across the UK, people's lives are being cut short because we don't all have the same opportunities to live healthy lives.

Access to good-quality homes, education, and safe spaces in which to play, exercise and socialise all determine how long we're likely to live – they are the building blocks of a healthy society. But they are often missing from the discussion about health. Instead, discussions and policies tend to focus on individual behaviour. This means the causes of ill health are not addressed, and the health of our communities doesn't improve.

This guide offers local authorities five practical tips to have better discussions about health with local communities and partners. These conversations can highlight inequalities, improve understanding of the wider factors that shape our health and build support for change.

The Health Foundation

FRAME WORKS UK

1

More… talk about lives cut short

Be clear why action is needed on the building blocks of health: because lives are being cut short. This helps people to understand why action is needed – it's a matter of life and death. Use your judgement on when to bring this in – it won't be appropriate in all contexts.

Less… technical language

Avoid using terms like 'disability-free life expectancy' and 'healthy life expectancy', which few people understand. They're fine for conversations with colleagues and experts, but focus on lives being cut short in public-facing communications.

2

More… the building blocks of health

Explain that a thriving society needs all the right 'building blocks' of health in place, such as jobs, housing and education. Talk about problems facing your area as blocks that are missing or need replacing, and the role local authorities play in constructing a healthy place, fixing the gaps and strengthening society.

Less… relying on numbers

Numbers do not speak for themselves – we interpret them through our own existing understanding of the world. Help people make sense of facts and figures by putting them in context. Explain the causes and consequences, making them as relatable as possible, and highlight why they matter.

3

More… focus on systems

Give examples and show how one of the building blocks, like housing or jobs, affects our health. Explain it step by step, using language that signals cause and effect: because, this leads to, this results in, this means.

Less… focus on individuals

When it comes to health we often default to ideas like, 'It's up to individuals to make better choices.' We need to avoid triggering this common, but unproductive, way of thinking – it can lead to stigma and blame, and it doesn't address the wider causes of health problems. Keep your story focused on systems and environments.

4

More… talk of solutions

Show that change is possible to avoid people feeling that nothing can be done. Build specific, concrete solutions into your communications early and be explicit that we can make a difference.

Less… focus on crisis

Show the urgency of the situation but don't leave people at the crisis – it can leave people feeling fatalistic about change or overwhelmed by the problem. Instead, show that the health of our society can be improved, and explain how.

5

More… about the whole system that supports health

When people want to make the conversation about the NHS, remind them that the NHS was never meant to go it alone. Explain how it's one part of a wider system that supports health, along with local authority services and including building blocks like decent homes, public transport and green spaces.

Less… talk of reducing strain

In research, highlighting the need to reduce strain on the NHS did not build support for action on the wider determinants of health. Seeing ill health as a burden on the NHS or the economy can also risk triggering blame towards individuals. It's more helpful to talk about health as a crucial asset for a healthy and prosperous community, where we all have the chance to thrive.