



## District Councils and Public Health: Guide for new councillors

### What is the district council role in public health?

- Since April 2012 county councils have had statutory responsibility for public health in two-tier areas, and have to employ a Director of Public Health.
- District councils run many statutory services that have a direct bearing on the success of public health in two-tier areas.
- District councils and county councils (as well as other stakeholders) need to work in partnership to make public health a success.

### Services district councils provide that deliver public health objectives

- Housing
  - Damp, overcrowded, poor quality housing can cause and worsen poor physical and mental health.
  - Through the regulation of private sector housing and licensing homes in multiple occupation district councils ensure people live in decent rented homes.
  - District councils fund and administer Disabled Facilities adaptations, which keep people independent in their own homes for longer and prevent more costly care in the long-run.
- Preventing and tackling homelessness
  - District councils have statutory responsibility for preventing and tackling homelessness. People who are homeless or have experienced homelessness may have health issues which lead to a significantly lower life expectancy.
  - There are links between people experiencing mental health problems (e.g. depression, post-traumatic stress disorder) and homelessness.
- Planning
  - Planning policy can ensure that development plans for local areas include open and green spaces to play and exercise; encourage the use of public transport or cycling and walking; and that new developments have community facilities and amenities which encourage social engagement.
  - Planners must also identify land that is contaminated, and determine what action needs to be taken to protect the public and support the site's regeneration if appropriate.

- Licensing and community safety
  - Excessive alcohol consumption damages health and can contribute to wider social problems. Licensing committees can take public health into consideration when deciding on licenses for premises serving and selling alcohol.
  - Community safety teams can work with partners to promote responsible drinking and tackle anti-social behaviour which can be alcohol-fuelled.
  
- Benefits
  - People in lower socioeconomic groups statistically have worse health. Frontline officers working in benefits, homelessness and housing teams can all signpost people to initiatives and partners who can support people improve their health in a number of ways e.g. diet and nutrition, physical activity, stopping smoking, more informed alcohol consumption, house insulation and affordable warmth measures. As a ward councillor you may also be able to signpost people who attend your surgeries to these forms of support.
  
- Leisure and parks
  - District councils are responsible for providing leisure facilities. Whether directly owned and operated by the council or not, swimming pools, running tracks, gyms and leisure centres all help people take more exercise, stay active and improve their health.
  - The provision of parks and green spaces give people space to play and exercise, and contributes to improved physical and mental health.
  
- Environmental health
  - Environmental health teams in district councils play a vital role in protecting public health and work with businesses to ensure a healthy workforce.
  - Their role includes:
    - food safety inspections to make sure the food served in restaurants, cafes, nurseries and schools is hygienic and safe;
    - monitoring air pollution which exacerbates respiratory illnesses;
    - monitoring noise complaints and investigating where necessary;
    - ensuring the 200,000 homes not on mains water have safe water supplies;
    - infectious disease control;
    - occupational health and safety;
    - emergency planning.

- Economic development and employment support
  - Being in work is a major factor in health, and economic development teams can contribute to public health outcomes through encouraging businesses to locate and expand in the district, employing local people.

### **Why is public health important?**

- Investing now in public health measures will save the NHS, local government, and central government money in the long-run. Healthier people need fewer costly interventions later on in life.
- Public health provides opportunities to join up services provided by district councils, county councils, the NHS, and voluntary and community organisations; saving money and improving the experience for individuals and families.
- Health impacts on people's ability to get and keep a job. To increase employment and productivity, and reduce unemployment, health must be taken into account, and people with physical and mental health issues offered help to tackle or manage them. People in work are more likely to exercise, have more money to eat a healthier diet, and are less likely to excessively drink alcohol or smoke.

### **What can district councillors do for public health?**

- You can champion public health in your council and to the partners you work with, making sure that your council 'mainstreams' public health through all its services and plans.
- You can use data and public health indicators to identify what the key health issues are in your area, and identify how these can be tackled.
- You can follow the work of the Health and Wellbeing Board and Clinical Commissioning Group(s) in your area, to ensure the needs of your constituents are recognised.
- If you sit on the licensing committee, you could consider public health in the decisions you make about granting licenses for premises selling alcohol.
- If you are on an overview and scrutiny committee you could undertake a review of the public health progress your council is making.
- You can support the Care Quality Commission in its inspections of healthcare settings in your area (hospitals, doctor surgeries, care homes) by sharing local intelligence you have or encouraging your constituents to contact them.
- You can engage with your local Healthwatch, the consumer champion for users of health and social care services and help them understand local needs and engage local people. You can find your local Healthwatch on their website <http://www.healthwatch.co.uk/find-local-healthwatch>.
- You can work with your Director of Public Health so that evidence and information about housing and environmental needs in your area feed into the Joint Strategic Needs assessment, which is the local evidence base which determines local health priorities and commissioning.

## **Want to find out more?**

The District Councils' Network is the organisation representing district councils within the Local Government Association and directly to government. We lobby central government and the Local Government Association to make sure districts are heard. We undertake research, provide support, and share best practice. Find out more about the District Councils' Network's lobbying work, publications and event we run on our website [www.districtcouncils.info](http://www.districtcouncils.info).

We have a series of publications on public health, which set out more information about why district councils are vital to public health and includes case studies on what many district councils are already doing to improve the health of their residents. You can find them here: <http://districtcouncils.info/2014/09/15/dcn-attends-phe-annual-conference-health-publications-refresh/>.

To better understand the NHS in your area, and how the NHS and local government link on public health, you may be interested in the Simple NHS Guide: <http://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/simple-nhs-guide.pdf>.

## **Information about your local area**

East Herts District Council Health and Wellbeing Lead Officers:

Simon Barfoot  
Environmental Health Promotions Officer

Paul Thomas-Jones  
Environmental Health Manager

Health and Wellbeing Board Chair:

Councillor Colette Wyatt-Low  
Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Care, Herts County Council

Director of Public Health:

Jim McManus  
Director of Public Health, Herts County Council