

Building community capacity through a healthy food programme:

An evaluation of Healthy Living Platform



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Introduction

Healthy Living Platform (HLP) is a no-cost membership-based service which primarily engages families with children aged 0-4-years old. HLP promotes healthy behaviours and aims to provide an environment that encourages families to eat healthily, socialise, and be physically active. The Healthy Living Platform was established as an independent organisation in 2019.

HLP focuses on building community capacity through volunteer training and upskilling, improving health and wellbeing, and connecting families with their community and other sources of support. This provides a unique opportunity to learn what works to build community capacity and to evidence the difference this makes for young families in a deprived, inner-city area.

Community capacity refers to 'what people in local communities are able to do to help and support each other'. Similar initiatives have identified three levels to community capacity building:

- 1 Material capacity (job roles, physical assets, and infrastructure)
- 2 Personal capacity at an individual level (self-esteem, health behaviours, and skill development)
- 3 Cultural capacity at a community level (co-production opportunities, increased social networking, and connections to other organisations).

Methods

This evaluation aimed to provide evidence for how HLP built community capacity in the LEAP area, to inform its future work and to generate broader insights about how community-led food programmes can build community capacity.

The in-house evaluation and research team planned and conducted a mixed methods study to understand the impact of HLP for families, volunteers and the community. Primary data was collected through:

- + A survey exploring local families' experience of participating in HLP and the impact it had on their lives
- + Focus groups with staff and volunteers
- + Semi-structured interviews with HLP partners and individuals who have participated in HLP.

Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. The quantitative data generated from the survey was used to develop descriptive statistics. These findings were then triangulated to explore the question of how HLP have built community capacity and what changes have occurred as a result of the HLP programme.

Findings/Results

This evaluation found that HLP has had an extremely positive impact on the local community and has successfully built community capacity in the LEAP area. Four key findings are:

1. Benefits for local families

Families experience financial benefits from participating in HLP. They have more knowledge and confidence in cooking

and eating healthy foods. Participants identify participating in HLP as contributing to their improved mental wellbeing. Families feel more connected to the community after participating in HLP.

2. Benefits for volunteers

HLP volunteers feel more confident in running activities, have developed transferable knowledge and skills, and feel more connected to the community. They also benefit from being

given ownership of projects; with the skills gained from HLP some volunteers have taken up the opportunity to start their own businesses.

3. Partnership working

Successful partnership working has enabled greater reach within the community and supported the development of HLP's community capacity.

Conclusion

This evaluation demonstrates how building community capacity underpins HLP and the activities that they plan and run. It also illustrates how HLP have successfully built community capacity within the LEAP area in many ways:

Personal capacity

On a personal level, HLP improves the health and wellbeing of participants through increasing access to healthy affordable food, changes in healthy eating behaviours, and improvements to health and mental wellbeing. It also enables knowledge, confidence and skill development which has led volunteers to go on to paid employment. Families have also experienced financial benefits through HLP. HLP has also made an impact for many individuals within the community by encouraging independence, fostering confidence, and supporting participants to be community leaders. This will continue to benefit the community for many years to come.

Cultural capacity

At a cultural level, HLP has contributed to encouraging social networking and creating opportunities for connection in the community through food, as well as developing successful partnerships with other organisations and services which benefit the community and further build community capacity.

Material capacity

Material capacity is a potential area for improvement. While HLP had a positive impact on their staff, volunteers and employment opportunities, its lack of physical assets could hinder expansion. Development in this area would enable HLP to grow and have a greater impact for the local community.

4. The need for stable funding

The evaluation highlighted the challenge of building community capacity. Challenges with funding and capacity have restricted HLP's growth and development.

HLP's work in building community capacity has been hugely successful for many local families, indicating the need for HLP's work to continue. Increased funding is crucial for HLP to continue their work, increase team capacity, and expand and improve the service, enabling them to continue to build community capacity within Lambeth.

