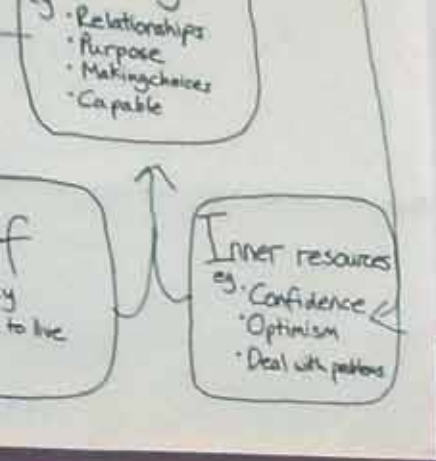


Five to strive

Confidence course and mentoring
Cheshire West and Chester Council





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In a nutshell

The Health and Wellbeing team at Cheshire West and Chester Council had a good understanding of the public health evidence base for their area. But they felt that responding only to this data would not sufficiently tackle the wider social determinants of health. The team decided to consult directly with residents to find out what they felt were the biggest obstacles to improving their health and wellbeing.

In response to talking to local people, Cheshire West and Chester Council has devised a group-based confidence course – called Five to Strive – complemented by one-to-one mentor support sessions to help participants achieve personal goals.

So far, Five to Strive has been run in three different locations, and the feedback from both course participants and mentors has been excellent. Some of the changes in participants' lives include:

- three people have got work since attending the confidence course, or as a result of being mentored
- two young women who were living in temporary housing when the course began have now found permanent accommodation
- another young woman in vulnerable circumstances has secured volunteer humanitarian work in Goa, India
- a woman diagnosed with bipolar disease has taken steps to manage her condition better, such as meeting regularly with a therapist and cutting down on smoking
- a man with a history of offending is volunteering as a mentor for young people.
- a group of participants has arranged to meet regularly socially to keep supporting each other
- another group has begun volunteering at a local gardening project, and one individual has become a volunteer at a local boat museum
- one woman is managing her finances better and has joined the Credit Union Christmas Club and for the first time will have money for her children at Christmas
- one woman has completed six sessions with a volunteer personal-trainer to improve her fitness and reduce her stress levels
- other people have joined healthy walks groups to lose weight and to socialise
- two participants who live in the same supported housing accommodation have arranged to have a meal together one day a week.

These achievements help to contribute to three of the Marmot Review's five policy objectives for tackling the social determinants of health:

- maximise an individual's capability and control over their life
- create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities
- strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention.

things for other people
friends and strangers?



Very often
Quite often
Sometimes
Not very often
Not at all

F ✓ AB Δ

What the course participants say

“The course is excellent. You shouldn’t have to be in a really hard place to get this kind of support, everybody should be able to have it, it should be common place.”

What the mentors say

“I think the confidence course and the mentoring has got a high success rate of producing someone at the end of it who is going to be in a better place mentally, financially, socially. It’s a lovely combination.”

What the council says

“If we’re trying to address issues within deprived communities, the best people to start to identify some of those issues are the people who live in them.”

How did Five to Strive come about?

Part of the role of the health and wellbeing team at Cheshire West and Chester Council is to identify who needs services, or is likely to do so in the longer term.

The team was well aware of the health profile of the area. West Cheshire and Chester has stark differences between residents' life experiences: for example, three areas – Blacon (Chester), Grange & Rossmore and Central Westminster (Ellesmere Port), and Winsford South and West Winsford (Winsford) consistently rank in the 10 per cent most deprived Lower Output Areas in England (based on 7 domains of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2007). Across the locality, there is a 13-year gap in life expectancy at birth between the poorest and the most affluent electoral wards.

There is a focus on tackling key public health indicators such as smoking prevalence and obesity. However, the team felt that they were still unclear about what residents thought were the key obstacles and challenges to them improving their health and wellbeing.

To try and improve this understanding they undertook consultation with residents in poor communities: the results were revealing. While things such as the need to lose weight did come up, by far the most common issues were a lack of work, poor housing or financial problems such as managing debt.

Julia Hope, Strategic Commissioning Manager for Health and Wellbeing at Cheshire West and Chester, says that:

“The issues raised were worries that people have to deal with daily, things that they feel they need to address before they could start to think about giving up smoking or losing weight.”

Many people felt they lacked the confidence and capacity to do something about the problems they had identified. In fact, many of them hadn't taken time to consider what might improve their wellbeing. As Hope explains:

“People get on with the day-to-day issues in their life but they don't actually take time to stop and think ‘what would improve my quality of life?’ What are the things that, if I tackle them, are going to make a positive difference to me and my family?”

What's happened?

Confidence course

The Health and Wellbeing team devised a confidence course called Five to Strive aimed at people living in the three target communities.

The course builds on the New Economics Foundation (nef) Five Ways to Wellbeing, which are:

- Connect: build connections with family, friends, neighbours and colleagues
- Give: join a group, volunteer your time, do something nice for a friend or stranger
- Be active: discover a physical activity you enjoy
- Take notice: be curious
- Keep learning: try something new, rediscover an old interest.

According to nef, if individuals were to build these into their daily routines they could add 7.5 years onto their lives.

What the course contains

The nine-week confidence and wellbeing course included the following modules:

1. Introduction
2. Volunteer mentor role to support the achievement of wellbeing goals
3. How confident are we?
4. Confidence in action
5. Money skills (with staff from Barclays Bank)

6. To be or not to be assertive (including verbal communication and body language)
7. Problem solving, planning and prioritising
8. What have we learnt?
9. Celebrate next steps

Having agreed a common understanding of wellbeing, participants were asked to set themselves three 'wellbeing goals' early on in the course. These were to be things that they could work on with their mentors outside of the course.

Reflecting the earlier consultation on what people felt were their real problems, the majority of participants listed goals related to topics such as financial management (especially debt), general family problems that needed addressing, and issues to do with personal safety (such as domestic violence).

Attendees

The team has run the course in the three target areas: each has had 10–12 participants, with a mix of gender, ages and backgrounds (see 'Things to think about' for a discussion on the challenges of recruitment). Attendance rates were excellent. This in part reflected the effort that the Five to Strive team put in ahead of the course to actively recruit participants through people who were already working closely with them, such as support workers, project workers, housing association employees and mental health support service workers.

The team was also very relaxed about participants coming along with one of these workers – or another supportive person – to the first module to help make it feel less intimidating. They worked hard to respond to participant feedback during the course so that it stayed relevant and interesting (see the section below on participative appraisal), and encouraged a group dynamic to develop so that the participants began to support each other and realise that their contribution mattered to the others attending the course.

Volunteer mentor scheme

The Five to Strive team was conscious that running a course on confidence would not in itself be enough to help most people move on a bit further from where they felt stuck. By its very nature a course will be a discussion about problems within the safety of a group setting, and therefore at some level theoretical.

To help address this and to complement participant learning on the confidence course, the team set up a volunteer mentor scheme to run alongside and beyond the course. Each mentor would have a mentee who was a participant on one of the three confidence courses.

Mentors were asked to volunteer up to 30 hours of time (in practice some gave more than this) with a course participant (mentee), and focus on helping them to achieve 1 or more of their personal goals.

In practice, some of this time has been in working hours and some has been in the mentors' own time.

Recruitment

Mentors were recruited via an advertisement distributed through local networks focused primarily on the public sector and voluntary and community organisations. Initially, the council received expressions of interest from 120 people from a variety of organisations including council staff, Cheshire Police, Chester District Housing Trust, Muir Housing, Weaver Vale Housing Trust, Western Cheshire PCT, Central and Eastern PCT, Environment Agency, Job Centre Plus, Places for People, Groundwork, Citizens Advice Bureau and The Grosvenor Estate.

From these, 60 went on to undertake mentor training; due to changes of circumstances for some of these mentors, only 40 completed all of the training.

Training

Mentors completed an intensive training day on the sorts of people and issues they were likely to encounter. The council initially commissioned the Impact Factory to develop the first mentor training course. However, the Five to Strive team extensively developed the training to incorporate more practical elements of mentoring such as boundary setting, signposting and referral procedures.



Mentors meeting mentees: how the selection process worked

The team decided to introduce the mentees to the mentors in the second week of the confidence course rather than wait until the 9-week course was complete. It was not compulsory for mentees to begin working with their mentors this early on, but it gave them the chance to utilise this extra capacity while the course was continuing.

The team used a series of ice-breaker exercises (“not unlike speed dating”, quipped one mentor) to allow mentees and mentors to get to know each other a little. Each mentee/mentor listed their preferred three mentors/mentees they would like to work with, and the team allocated accordingly.

Some of the most important learning came from this process (see ‘Things to think about’).

What are the project outcomes?

The confidence course and mentoring sessions have generated positive momentum for individual mentees, and kick-started some important group support too.

Individual outcomes

As expected, participants largely chose to tackle work/worklessness, money and personal safety problems. As a result of the programme three people have become employed (for example, see 'Lisa's story' in this section below).

Hope says that the changes in some individuals have been striking:

“People who literally did not have the confidence to talk to somebody, or felt that they did not have the strength or the capacity to deal with some of their problems... seeing the changes in those individuals from week one to the end of the course... they are totally different people.”

Two longer examples of these changes follow. Others include:

- three people have got work since attending the confidence course, or as a result of being mentored
- two young women who were living in temporary housing when the course began have now found permanent accommodation
- another young woman in vulnerable circumstances has secured volunteer humanitarian work in Goa, India
- a woman diagnosed with bipolar disease has taken steps to manage her condition better, such as meeting regularly with a therapist and cutting down on smoking
- a man with a history of offending is volunteering as a mentor for young people.
- a group of participants has arranged to meet regularly socially to keep supporting each other
- another group has begun volunteering at a local gardening project, and one individual has become a volunteer at a local boat museum
- one woman is managing her finances better and has joined the Credit Union Christmas Club and for the first time will have money for her children at Christmas
- one woman has completed six sessions with a volunteer personal-trainer to improve her fitness and reduce her stress levels
- other people have joined healthy walks groups to lose weight and to socialise
- two participants who live in the same supported housing accommodation have arranged to have a meal together one day a week.

Lisa's story, as told to Andrew Ross

"I went initially because I had a friend who wouldn't go on it and I said 'Look, I'll come on it if you come on it'.

But when I got into it I realised that a lot of my issues were about getting back into work. I was absolutely terrified of interviews, I didn't know what a covering letter was, didn't know how to write a CV.

As part of the course you chose three goals, things that you would like to have the confidence to do. Getting back to work was my big thing.

My mentor told me about jobs' clubs, web sites, extra training that would help. Every week he'd say, 'Right, we've got to do interview technique'.

And I'd be like, 'Can we just do something else?'

And in the end he was like, 'Lisa, you're doing it next week and that's the end of that'.

He set up a practice interview with managers who work [at the council]. It was nice because when you go for an interview normally you don't get feedback – but they brought me back in and said 'you did great on this but you need to work on this', so I knew where I'd gone wrong and where I'd gone right.

I went on to do it for real for an interview for the council. And I've actually got a job with human services.

Without my mentor I would have gone back to factory work because I would have always thought I couldn't work at somewhere like the council because they all look dead good. But he has been an absolutely fantastic mentor."

[Name has been changed to protect confidentiality]

Mary's story, as told by Julia Hope

"One lady on the course said that her key issue was that whenever any letters came through the door she completely ignored them. She put them in a pile because she was afraid of what they contained.

With support from her mentor she began opening them. It turned out, at that time, she was owed money, rather than owing it.

She now has the confidence to open all her letters and has dealt with key issues she previously feared.

She is feeling good about herself because she has tackled a problem that was a headache for her: the fear factor every time a letter came through the door."

[Name has been changed to protect confidentiality]

Group outcomes

The Five to Strive team has run the course in three different locations in the area – as well as individual outcomes each group has developed its own dynamic and momentum.

Winsford

A core group from the Winsford course has begun volunteering in an existing community gardening project, which includes an estate, local schools and other groups.

Some members of the group were actively involved in a consultation event with local residents to identify their priorities which have influenced West Winsford Neighbourhood Plan.

Five people on the course have asked to be trained as mentors for subsequent confidence courses so that they can mentor people in their own community.

Ellesmere Port

The majority of people in this group are 40–50 years old and they all felt isolated socially. They have decided to put together a diary of events and activities that they can do together. This is a big step forward because as individuals they have not previously organised this kind of social support for themselves. The activities have to be at no cost or free for people who are on benefits.

One of their plans is to visit a local woodland. Although many of them have been living in the area for years some group members weren't aware that it even existed.

Blacon

This group wanted to do more to support continual lifelong learning for individuals. They put together a list of the sorts of things they would like to do and the Five to Strive team is helping them to find people who could be speakers at their group on things such as nutrition, life coaching and money management.

Outcomes related to the social determinants of health

From the outset, this programme has been targeted at the 'causes of the causes' with a focus on moving beyond traditional public health indicators to looking at what else the council could be doing to tackle health inequalities locally.

The Marmot Review (2010) summarises the evidence of the 'causes of the causes of ill health' as being:

- the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age
- early childhood, which impacts on health and disadvantage throughout life
- cumulative effects of hazards and disadvantage through life
- stress and the levels of control people have over their lives
- mental wellbeing, which has a profound role in shaping physical health and contributing to life chances.

While this is only a qualitative review of the Cheshire West and Chester programme, there are some points worth noting regarding three of Marmot's six policy objectives for tackling the social determinants of health.



Maximise an individual's capability and control over their life

One of the most important outcomes from the council's perspective has been to act on what people in disadvantaged communities said was standing in the way of them increasing their capacity to do something about the problems they face. The programme is a direct response to concerns people had about their lack of confidence and capacity.

The Five to Strive team noted that a course on its own would be unlikely to tackle the capacity issues they had identified, and the mentoring programme is an attempt to address this and provide continuing support and practical advice for mentees.

Hope says that:

“All the way through we allowed them to lead us down the routes where they felt they needed support. We did not start this thinking we knew the issues they were going to raise – and this was a little bit scary because, to be honest, we didn't know where it was going to take us.”

This has led to individuals achieving personal objectives that help them to feel more in control of their lives. Some have got a job, others have got secure housing, many are volunteering, one is travelling, and another has a more supportive framework within which to manage her mental health condition.

As one mentee put it:

“By allowing someone to live everyday life and make choices themselves... that’s a massive gift you’ve just given somebody because it’s lifelong.”

Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities

The findings in the ‘Group outcomes’ section above suggests that participating in the confidence course and mentor programme has helped people to focus collaboratively on their local environment and participate together on making it better (for example, volunteering in a gardening project, visiting woodlands – see above).



Strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention

The Five to Strive programme was well placed to contribute to preventing ill health because of its commitment to starting with the needs of the target audience, as expressed through the initial consultation. The information the team gathered at this point – such as concerns about work and money – fed directly into the rest of the course and mentoring programme. This gave the team confidence that it was addressing issues that really mattered to participants, and hopefully therefore helping to address some of their worries that were preventing them from staying well.

Participating in the confidence course provided what one participant called a ‘social support system’, sometimes for the first time. Given the positive effect that this sort of support can have on mental health and wellbeing, this is an important outcome.

Of course, getting socially marginalised people to participate in courses such as this is one of the key challenges. The Five to Strive team was particularly adept at working through on-the-ground contacts to identify which of their clients they felt would embrace this approach and benefit most from the support on offer. Once the team had got them to start participating, they used a participative appraisal approach (see below) to keep them actively involved, and respond to their concerns.

The complementary mentor scheme was also a crucial element of the overall approach to ill health prevention.

I want some of that: success factors and learning

Why did this programme go well?

A participative appraisal approach

The confidence course is based on a participative appraisal approach, that is, involving participants by listening to their needs and shaping content in response to this.

Jeremy Mills is a retired educator and assisted with preparing the course materials and approach. He says that one of the positive aspects of the course was that by listening to communities before the course and to participants during it, the Five to Strive team included them as “partners in the process”.

Mentees seemed to value this style of approach (see next section).

This approach may help to explain why the course was attractive to a range of people from a variety of backgrounds. This includes men who might normally be more reluctant to put themselves forward for a course that encourages participants to reveal some of their own vulnerabilities.

Facilitator attributes and skills

The mentees and mentors had high praise for the way in which the course was delivered, for example:

“[She] delivered that course properly, she was aware of everybody’s body language, she noticed who was quiet and who needed bringing out a little bit, she was sensitive to it, and she knew how to make us shut up.”

Mentee

“Some of the paperwork... the way it was worded was a bit too much. But you could say to the [facilitator] ‘cut it down’ and she would listen and change it the next week to make it plainer.”

Mentee

“She let us know that she is no different to us neither.”

Mentee

“The facilitator has been actually amazing in terms of delivery and I think that has been a major strength of the programme.”

Mentor

The mentees interviewed for this review summarised the desirable facilitator attributes and skills as:

- humour
- vulnerability: using examples from their life where appropriate (the mentees particularly valued a facilitator sharing one of her own stumbling blocks: driving on a motorway)
- informal, but with enough presence to be formal when necessary
- inclusive: making everyone's points seem important
- flexible and responsive to feedback
- aware of the audience: there are likely to be many other demands going on in people's lives.

Mentor support

Mentors received a day of training and met as a group often to review any problems (most commonly mentees not getting in touch), and to support each other in their mentoring role.

This support was something that was emphasised by the mentors interviewed for this review. It allowed them to raise issues and concerns and it also served as a useful network and source of contacts for signposting mentees about the sorts of services and support available locally.

Things to think about

Recruiting mentees

Despite the ultimate success of the confidence courses, Hope describes recruitment of course participants as "incredibly difficult".

The council published a flyer and distributed it widely. However, this had limited reach. Part of the challenge was that if someone was the type of person who would pick up a leaflet and act on it, then they were probably not in the target group for the course.

Working through contacts and frontline workers proved to be much more successful. The team spoke with frontline workers such as support workers, project workers, housing association employees and mental health support service workers.

Hope adds that:

"It was amazing how many people signed up the day before. You need to realise that although you need to do a lot of work to promote the course there is very little time between referrals coming in and the course starting... that's how people's lives work."

Managing the initial meeting of mentors/mentees

Both mentors and mentees described this stage of the process as being challenging. The mentors attended in week two of the course and a series of activities introduced them to the mentees. Both mentors and mentees privately selected who they would prefer to work with, and the Five to Strive team attempted to match these preferences as well as they could.

One mentor described the process as "quite nerve-wracking... perhaps it could have been a little less intense."

Following discussions with participants the Five to Strive team has suggested that, rather than mentees meeting the mentors so early in the course (week 2), they produce a pen picture and photograph first, and that the facilitator clarifies what the role of the volunteer mentor will be.

Despite these suggested changes, the mentors and mentees interviewed for this review seemed to be content with who they had been matched with.

And one mentor said that:

“Some of the mentees weren’t sure about it but it was good to challenge them.”

Supporting a participatory and informal approach

Some of the elements of the approach on which this programme is based do not necessarily sit comfortably within the culture of a typical local authority.

Part of the success of the course has been to set up an informal atmosphere that avoids local authority jargon, resists hierarchy and minimises paperwork.

Added to this, Mills says that other councils who are interested in replicating the approach at Cheshire West and Chester cannot underestimate the importance of building trust and authenticity with the target audiences:

“The facilitators were really good at working with people, and listening to them, and not giving them the party line... If other councils want to take this on, they have to understand that there isn’t a shortcut to that rapport that you develop with this kind of course.”

Setting effective boundaries

Mentors were encouraged to be open about things that had happened in their lives as a way of building rapport with mentees and to help break down a sense of ‘us and them’. This approach was adopted by the course facilitators and evaluation has confirmed that mentees found it easier to open up because facilitators were sharing their life experiences too.

However, mentors were cautioned not to share anything that they may later regret divulging.

Conversely, facilitators and mentors needed to make it clear to mentees that if they revealed anything that implied (or made clear) that either they or someone else was in danger or vulnerable, then the facilitators/mentors would be compelled to pass that information on to the relevant agencies.

Being sensitive to low levels of literacy/numeracy

Some course participants were sensitive about their poor literacy and numeracy. It was important that the course didn’t reinforce this through how it was delivered. Facilitators used very little writing, and anything that was written down was spoken as well. Materials were largely visual (picture-based).

Next steps

After the success of the first round of the confidence course and mentoring programme, the Five to Strive team has commissioned the council’s Adult Learning Team to deliver both across the borough from December 2011.

The Adult Learning Team has also agreed to get both the confidence course and the mentor training accredited.

For further information

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Notes

The mentor (two) and mentee (three) interviews conducted for this review were based on the Winsford group only.

Julia Hope, Strategic Commissioning Manager for Health and Wellbeing at Cheshire West and Chester, provided an overview of the other two courses and mentoring programmes.

Cheshire West and Chester received a grant for £10,000 from Local Government Improvement and Development to:

- conduct CRB checks for all mentors
- pay for room hire, refreshments and child minding expenses for mentees
- organise and host three celebration events
- pay volunteer expenses.

Be active: On average, over the last four weeks, how many days have you done at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise e.g. walking, cycling, gardening, vigorous housework?

Every Day

4-6 Days

2-3 Days



None



5 to strive

Cheshire West and Chester

How
new
a ne



Not Very much

5 to strive Cheshire West and Chester



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