

# **Using Public Health Policy to Move Practitioners Towards a Community Level Approach to Tackling Health Needs**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The nature of public health policy and practice is, and has historically been, contested. For some it constitutes the provision of life-style advice delivered to individuals. For others it requires a community level and structural response to broader problems. As part of a large multi-method evaluation of 'Starting Well' (Scotland's National Health Demonstration Project for child health), the study reported in this paper aimed to determine whether an intervention based on broad public health principles could contribute to expanding the role of project health visitors from the individual to the community.

## **Study Design**

A process evaluation was conducted over two time points with a purposively selected sample of management and health visiting staff (N=44) responsible for developing and implementing the 'Starting Well' programme. The study used semi-structured interviews that covered a range of issues including: the public health role of health visitors; definitions of public health practice; and, the influence of Starting Well on practice.

## **Results**

Whilst greater contact with families allowed health visitors to gain a greater understanding of the problems and life circumstances of their case-load families, the evaluation of Starting Well raised a range of issues about the feasibility of systematically changing practice within a short timescale and demonstrated the difficulties of implementing an approach that relied on individual values and organisational context as much as guidelines and assessment tools. The degree to which the systems and structures within which practitioners were operating facilitated a broad public health approach was limited.

## **Conclusions**

As part of the wider Health Improvement agenda within health policy Public Health as a profession in the UK has seen drastic changes in the last few years with increasing numbers of workers expected to have a familiarity with its principles and modus operandi. It remains however a contested area of work and implementing its

wider practice requires change at organisational, professional and individual levels. This has implications for current policy assumptions about how to improve the population's health.

**Key Words:** public health policy, health visiting, community approaches