

School for Public Health Research

Public Health Evidence Briefing

Building the evidence for cost-effective public health practice

Supporting public health decision-making by local authorities

- Amid the complexities of council politics and budgetary pressures, there is increased urgency to demonstrate return on investment in interventions to improve health and wellbeing outcomes, and explore methods of decision-support for priority-setting.
- NIHR SPHR researchers are working with several local authorities in England to understand what supports might help such decision-making.
- Local authorities want local data, contextual factors and political priorities built into decision-making models and tools.



Exploring methods for supporting public health commissioners in priority setting to improve population health and address health inequalities.

Key issues

- In a climate of austerity and ongoing spending cuts, there is increased urgency to demonstrate return on investment in relation to public health interventions and explore methods of decision-support for public health priority-setting.
- The return of the responsibility for public health commissioning to local authorities means that priority-setting takes place within new organisational and cultural settings, which presents new challenges.

What we did

An initial two year study supported public health priority-setting in three local authority case study sites across England. The study brought together academic expertise from health economics and public health in a series of seminars and targeted decision-making support sessions for public health commissioners. The relevance of prioritisation methods and their impact on spending patterns within and across programmes was evaluated through a series of initial and follow up interviews with decision-makers in each site.

Findings and implications

The research found four influences on priorities for public health investment:

- An organisational context where health was less likely to be associated with health care and accountability was to a local electorate.
- A commissioning and priority-setting context located within broader local authority priority-setting processes.
- Different views of what counts as evidence and, in particular, the importance of local knowledge.
- Debates over what constitutes a public health intervention, triggered by the transfer of the public health budget from the NHS to councils.

What next?

A 12-month follow on study has selected several local authorities in England to identify what helps and hinders the uptake and impact of adopted priority-setting tools and approaches. The sites have been selected to enable findings from the main study to be tested and further developed in a rapidly changing local government context.

References:

Marks L, Hunter DJ, Scalabrini S, Gray J (2015) The return of public health to local government in England: changing the parameters of the public health prioritization debate? *Public Health* 129(9): 1194-1203.
<https://www.dur.ac.uk/public.health/projects/shiftingthegravity>

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