



Evaluation of an innovative approach to the Director of Public Health's annual report

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Summary Background. The aim of this study was to evaluate the process of an innovative 'presentation with discussion' approach to the Director of Public Health's (DPH) annual report for North Derbyshire Health Authority.

Study design. Mixed methods—survey and interviews.

Methods. Survey methods were used to obtain qualitative and quantitative data. Key stakeholders were sent a postal questionnaire, individuals attending presentations could respond via a printed slip or letter, structured group discussions following presentations were recorded manually, and presenters and producers were interviewed.

Results. Thirty-five of 41 (85.4%) key stakeholders returned questionnaires, 18 people responded individually, discussions following 26/30 (86.7%) presentations were documented, and all eight presenters and 11 producers were interviewed. The general response was extremely positive with 25 of 35 (71%) key stakeholders, 100% of presenters and 80% of producers preferring the new format to the previous year's report. People felt that it conveyed the public health message effectively, and appreciated the opportunity to contribute to the recommendations for improving health in North Derbyshire. Many were concerned that the circulation should be wide, and key stakeholders were keen to have a printed reference document to support their work. Presenters enjoyed the process although tailoring the presentations to unfamiliar audiences proved difficult. The production team found the process more efficient and focused, although direct production costs were increased. Presenters and producers were concerned that the process for implementing recommendations for action was not fully considered.

Conclusions. Most people preferred this innovative approach to the traditional annual report, and it is therefore recommended that this format should be used for future DPH annual reports. Key stakeholders still require a reference document, and presenters' briefing notes could be adapted for this purpose. Circulation of the report should be wide, and further consideration of how participants' recommendations for action are implemented is needed.

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Introduction

Directors of Public Health (DsPH) of district health authorities have a statutory obligation to produce an annual report on the health of their local population.¹ In North Derbyshire Health Authority, as elsewhere, this report was previously produced as a substantial written document. In 2001, instead of a written document, it was delivered as a 'presentation with discussion', enabling participants to suggest what the recommendations for health authority action should be.

The reason for the change in format was due to a number of perceived limitations of the traditional paper document. From the few presentations given to key stakeholders in previous years, a number of people had expressed that they had learned more from the presentations than from the written report. Discussions and feedback following such presentations had similarly proved extremely valuable. It was believed that a single paper document was unlikely to have suited the diverse range of groups to whom it was distributed,² whereas a presentation was thought to be more easily adaptable. There was also concern that few people read annual reports,³ and this new method had the potential to reach more people. Another consideration was the significant time and resources required to produce the written report,⁴ and it was believed that a presentation could be a more efficient process.

Since this was an innovative approach to delivering the annual report of the DPH and no literature evaluating different formats was found, it was considered to be important to evaluate the process.

Methods

Production of the new format annual report

The theme of the annual report (the health of older people) was agreed by the public health department. Priority topics within that theme were listed (these included the changing population structure; life expectancy; use of healthcare services; premature death rates; inequalities related to deprivation and locality; factors affecting the health and wellbeing of older people such as economic factors, living conditions, social capital and life style; individual health issues such as falls, strokes, dementia and incontinence; and the aims of the National Service Framework for Older People). The lead person for each of these topics was asked to write a few slides suitable for a wide audience, with

- A set of 42 high-quality professional photographic overhead projector slides (from which presenters could choose a selection)
- A set of projector slides
- Printed handouts for the audience containing copies of all 42 slides and a tear-off response slip
- Speakers' briefing notes for presenters
- A booklet with copies of the slides and blank spaces for presenters to write their own notes for a customised presentation

Figure 1 Contents of presentation cases.

background information for presenters. The slides were combined into one presentation, which was revised by a graphic designer, and the background information was compiled into speakers' briefing notes. The final product consisted of six portable filing cases (see Fig. 1 for contents).

CD-ROMs were recorded for those unable to attend a presentation or access it via the health authority's website, and printed flyers were distributed to advertise the presentations.

From May to October 2001, eight senior staff members from the public health directorate (three public health consultants, one specialist registrar, one specialist trainee, two public health specialists and one health promotion specialist) gave customised presentations to groups of people. Following each presentation, the opportunity to discuss the annual report was given and this was facilitated by a series of four questions (Fig. 2). A scribe documented the responses to these four questions in order to capture the views of the audience in a structured way. People were also invited to complete the slip attached to their printed handout, which contained these same four questions. Alternatively, they could write or respond electronically to the DPH via a link on the website.

Evaluation process

The evaluation consisted of five surveys of people who were involved in the annual report presentation, either as attendees or as part of the presentation or production teams. Although some quantitative data were collected, the research was predominantly qualitative as it sought to understand and illuminate the subjective experiences of those being researched.

Key stakeholder survey

The DPH identified 50 key personnel from organizations that had attended the presentations.

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