



What is a Director of Public Health (DPH)?

Introduction

This paper is not written as a job description or to detail the specific, often statutory functions of a DPH within the various organisations in which he or she is currently employed. It is more intended as an outline of the reasons why the position of a Director of Public Health or equivalent is an important strength, working for the health of a population within a defined area – for people within a place.

Guidance for creating a job description appropriate for a specific role can be found elsewhere as can the statutory functions in particular jurisdictions. In this paper ADPH has aimed to pull out the essential characteristics of the role which have endured for more than 160 years and will continue into the future.

Purpose of DPH role

The core purpose of the DPH is **as independent advocate for the health of the population and system leadership for its improvement and protection**. As such it should be a high-level statutory role bridging local authorities, the NHS and other appropriate sectors and agencies with responsibilities for health and well-being for a defined population. The DPH purpose and core role is the same whatever the structures within which they sit. This has not only been true historically (since William Duncan's appointment as the first Medical Officer of Health in Liverpool in 1847) but is also currently relevant across the UK.

Qualities

As an influential system leader, a high performing DPH requires the following qualities:

- high energy and passion to motivate others and use their energy;
- vision, bravery to 'dare to dream' and work towards long term aspirations;
- resilience, doggedness and the ability to persist where there may be difficulties;
- celebrates success but has the humility to give away credit to enable strong partnerships;
- the ability to 'think on one's feet', to improvise to get the best out of any situation;
- willingness and pragmatism to move on from traditional roles in order to achieve more.

Roles and functions

A Director of Public Health should be an individual trained, accredited, and registered in specialist public health.

A Director of Public Health will be responsible within their defined population for the delivery of:

- Measurable health improvement;
- Health Protection including emergency response;
- Public health input to health and care service planning and commissioning;
- Reduction of health inequalities.

They are likely to have further responsibilities as senior leaders within their organisation including management of services and corporate roles.

The following principal functions describe the ways a DPH will deliver the required outcomes:

- **Advocacy** – for the health and well-being of the population both within and outwith their organisation
- **Leadership** – pulling the agenda together, maintaining an overview across the three public health domains and working with other system leaders across the place
- **Population perspective** – putting the ‘denominator’ on the table and ensuring the needs of the population are considered alongside those of individuals
- **Translation and interpretation** – translating different approaches (from differing organisational/sectoral cultures and backgrounds) and interpreting views to produce ‘actionable insight’ – a distillation that enables decisions to be taken
- **Real understanding of their population** – advising and taking decisions based on deep knowledge of the local population and their health and well-being needs
- **Expertise** – provided through the high-level education and training in public health competencies and the wide-ranging experience gained as Consultant or Specialist in Public Health
- **Programme Director** – managing services impacting on health and well-being (as required locally) using evidence base to provide efficient and effective services

Deliverables

The DPH role does not depend on structural form although its effectiveness may be compromised by some structural constraints. Given the appropriate resource and authority (see requirements below) a DPH would be accountable to the following with related responsibilities:

Accountability	Responsibilities
Their population	<p>Independent advocacy – visible leadership; media work; communication with and objective advice to the public; DPH Annual Report</p> <p>Advice – influencing leaders and programmes within NHS, local government, third sector, business and commerce and integrating action</p> <p>Leadership across agencies – leading health partnerships and facilitating collaboration across organisations and sectors</p>
Secretary of State / CMO	<p>Health Protection – including surveillance; programme quality assurance; emergency response</p> <p>Improvement of health and well-being</p> <p>Oversight of service planning and commissioning</p> <p>Reduction of health inequalities across their population</p> <p>Working with partners and civil society to foster improved health and well-being</p>
Their employing organisation(s)	<p>Executive/Corporate/Strategic Director – Board level responsibilities; high-level performance and influence over the whole budget and agenda; innovation and challenge</p> <p>Principal adviser to the Health Partnerships (e.g. Health and Wellbeing Boards, Public Service Boards) – surveillance of population and interpretation of needs</p> <p>Service Director – leadership of public health and other services (locally agreed), financial accountability and co-design of evidence-based solutions</p>
PH system	<p>Capacity building – ensuring population perspective and public health skills are widely understood across professionals and the wider workforce</p> <p>Public health development – clinical audit, professional innovation and input to national initiatives</p> <p>Developing public health workforce – taking responsibility for their own professional development and creating a learning environment to support specialist and practitioner education, training and development and contributing to the wider development of the public health workforce</p>

Responsibilities and requirements

Directors of Public Health are the frontline leaders of public health working across the three domains of health improvement, health protection, and health care service planning and commissioning. A Director of Public Health must be empowered to have oversight and influence across all these determinants of health within local authorities, the NHS and primary care, and other sectors and agencies in order to secure the improving health of their population.

A Director of Public Health will need clearly defined responsibilities and powers which can be summarised as follows:

- The **professional status** and enablement to express an independent view in order to provide advocacy for the health of the population.
- A **requirement** to produce an independent, public annual report on the health and health needs of the population; and **authority** to comment publicly in a professional capacity on matters pertinent to the health of the local population.
- The **authority** to influence all the levers that impact on health and well-being and to act as a **statutory and principal advisor** (across the three public health domains).
- The **authority** to decide where to use resource to deliver health gains and reduce inequalities.
- **Executive/Corporate/Strategic Director** status – the ability to act at corporate/strategic level (as a full executive member of the corporate leadership team and reporting or accountable to a CEO or equivalent), with direct access to decision makers (such as local authority Cabinet and councillors; Health Board Independent Members etc); have credibility to engage externally; influence across all organisational functions and tiers; to work alongside other Directors; develop and promote corporate policy; and contribute to whole organisational decisions.
- **Information and intelligence** – a strong public health information and intelligence system supporting the DPH in providing relevant and timely intelligence and evidence reviews to enable prioritisation of resource and understanding of population health.
- Contribution to the professional **training of the public health workforce**.
- Contribution to a strong **public health academic and research function** – supporting evidence-based decision making and evaluation.

A Director of Public Health cannot work in isolation: they require adequately-resourced and professional Public Health teams providing the skills and experience to input to local service planning and commissioning, and to deliver Public Health programmes and advice across the health economy, supported by access to high quality local and national data and scientific evidence base.

Skills

The job description for a DPH describes the high profile senior leadership qualities required as the most senior advocate for public health within the organisation and on behalf of the populations served by the post:

- **system leadership across organisational boundaries** working strategically in a complex system with a wide range of stakeholders to influence and facilitate system-wide change;
- **population advocacy** involving advocating and lobbying on 'upstream' issues that affect public health;
- **independence** allowing public health leaders to challenge policy makers at a national level, to say things that are 'uncomfortable' and to address poor performance at a local level;
- **community engagement** consulting and working with communities using asset-based approaches to co-produce local solutions to public health problems;
- **visibility** involving building relationships with key partners in health, social care and third sector agencies, being able to influence their agendas effectively. It also involves building and maintaining the profile of public health at all levels;
- **making the case for public health** involving making an effective case for increased priority and resources for the public's health;
- **understanding, interpreting and communicating evidence** to ensure that organisations which distribute resources for public health and public health interventions do this in an effective and cost-effective manner;
- **building partnerships** to help lead a whole system approach across the public sector;
- **looking forward** beyond current pressures to understand future challenges and opportunities to do things better;
- **people and management skills** including team building, networking, building trust, negotiation and facilitation skills.