

A New Politics for Health: The *Birmingham Health Charter*

23rd November 2016, Birmingham City University

GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS

What is the purpose of the *Birmingham Health Charter*?

To reduce inequalities in health by changing policy at national and local level

To help build a social movement that will bring about change at a political level

Background

While policy makers and pundits agonise about the future of the NHS the Politics of Health Group (PoHG) believes that a glaring injustice is being side-lined. This is the injustice of health inequalities. Inequalities in health are no accident. They are the result of a failure right across the breadth of public policy. We know what causes them, we know what we need to do to put them right. There are organisations and individuals working really hard to counteract the different causes and consequences of health inequalities, but too often we are focusing on our own particular areas of concern. PoHG believes that what is needed now is joined up action - working together to make a real and comprehensive impact.

The Politics of Health Group together with its partners, Birmingham City University and the Equality Trust, has been working on a project designed to bring together activists and organisations to strengthen the campaign against health inequalities. We have used the 30th anniversary of the *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion*, a landmark international agreement, to kick-start this project.

The *Ottawa Charter*

Whilst the [*Ottawa Charter*](#) has been helpful in calling attention to health inequalities issues it is not well known outside of public health and health promotion circles. It was largely developed by experts, aimed at an international audience and targeted at governments, providing a framework for public health policies. In the UK success at meeting the Charter's aspirations has been limited, although it has generated some welcome initiatives such as the Healthy Cities movement. Many consider the *Ottawa Charter* too bland in its aspirations, and not enough attention has been paid to why it has not been successful, who/what is responsible for this and who has a vested interest in the status quo. We believe there is a need to recognise the importance of politics and power in generating and maintaining health inequalities, and shift the emphasis away from individual blame.

As part of our project, meetings have taken place in different parts of the country – Birmingham, Sheffield, Chester and London – to review the *Ottawa Charter*. They have shown that there is a real appetite for action to reduce health inequalities. The views expressed at these meetings have been used as the basis of the main event, the aim of which

is to produce a new charter - *The Birmingham Health Charter* - which can be used as a catalyst for a stronger, more united movement for health. The discussions have also provided the information for this guide.

Is the *Ottawa Charter* still relevant?

The *Ottawa Charter* has five themes – building healthy public policy, creating supportive environments, strengthening community action, developing personal skills and reorienting health services towards public health. Our discussion groups considered the themes to be still relevant today but they also recognised that things have moved on in 30 years – raising additional issues that have come to the fore and that need to be considered:

- Globalisation
- Climate change and the need for sustainable development
- The role of different environments – social, physical, political, economic
- The importance of food policy
- Education – throughout life
- The increased lack of security, combined with fear and prejudice
- Greater recognition of diversity and inclusivity
- Population change and flows due to migration, conflict and displacement
- The lack of economic models that promote/reduce inequalities
- The lack of political engagement
- Influence of mass and social media

While we can work with our colleagues in international health promotion organisations such as the People’s Health Movement and the European Health Network, PoHG alone doesn't have the capacity to develop a charter with the same high level aspirations as the *Ottawa Charter*. We do however consider that there is a need for a tool that is produced as the result of collective effort and around which people across different organisations and parts of society can coalesce. The *Birmingham Health Charter* can serve this purpose.

Why Birmingham?

Birmingham is one of the largest and most important cities in the UK and has been associated historically with a number of progressive movements such as innovative housing developments and improved social conditions for workers and communities. Geographically Birmingham links the south of the country with the north, making it a good place to begin a project that will address the economic and health inequalities between north and south.

What should a *Birmingham Health Charter* do?

1. Enthuse, energise and empower people to address social injustice
2. Strengthen advocacy and lobbying
3. Motivate people outside health circles
4. Stimulate new thinking
5. Identify allies in the fight for social and health equality
6. Provide the basis for a new coalition which recognises that good health requires political change

What would a new charter look like?

1. It should be rooted in a set of principles but also needs a set of actions
2. It should recognise that other charters exist¹ and should be complementary
3. It should use straightforward language
4. It should link with something that people are currently concerned about eg NHS
5. It should be positive and inclusive

Draft *Birmingham Health Charter*

Overleaf is an outline of a draft charter that has been drawn up using the [Ottawa Charter](#), the existing [PoHG Charter](#) and the output from the regional meetings and completed [survey forms](#) that were made available as part of this project. PoHG recognises that no one charter will contain everything that might be considered important for health. It is the **process** of producing a workable compromise that we consider to be important.

It is proposed that the *Birmingham Health Charter* contains three elements: a set of aspirations, or principles that build on the themes of the *Ottawa Charter*; a set of policies that would help realise these aspirations; and examples of actions that could be implemented by individuals and organisations, separately and collectively. It assumes that good health should be the fundamental right of everyone.

¹ Examples of other charters

PoHG Charter: <http://pohg.org.uk/support/charter.html>

Oldham Public Health Charter:

http://www.oldham.gov.uk/downloads/file/2323/the_oldham_public_health_charter

World Federation of Public Health Associations charter for public health:

http://www.wfpha.org/images/Charter_WFPHA.pdf

The Scottish Peoples Health Manifesto http://www.cope-scotland.org/images/Pdf/PHM_Manifesto_2016.pdf

The Birmingham Health Charter

Aspiration	Policies	Actions: National and local
Safety, peace and security		
Equitable social, economic and environmental conditions for health		
Food security and sustainability		
Universally available and holistic health care		
Solidarity between more and less affluent communities		
Engaged, informed and politically active population		
Diversity recognised as a benefit to all		
Loving, supportive and respectful relationships		

What we want of you

As participants in the Birmingham event we would like you to give some thought to the content of this guide and use the workshop sessions to flesh out the Charter by considering the following:

1. Are our aspirations relevant and are there any missing?
2. What policies are needed that could be implemented at national and local level?
3. What actions are required to bring about these policies, and specifically what can any groups or organisations you belong to do?
4. Finally we would like you to consider what you as an individual can do to help build a united movement for health

What will happen next?

The last session of the day will explore how we can all work more effectively together following this event and will provide space and time for a set of commitments to be agreed. To support future work PoHG is committed to establishing on its website a repository for any relevant documents including examples of research, action and campaigning. Participants can use the website as a space to keep in touch.

Information about the Politics of Health Group

The Politics of Health Group (PoHG) consists of people who believe that power exercised through politics and its impact on public policy is of fundamental importance for health. PoHG is a UK based group but with a clear international perspective. It is run by a small steering group who volunteer their time, and we have no paid workers. Our 320 supporters subscribe to an email discussion group whereby they can contribute to discussions on topics relating to our concerns. We have organised meetings and conferences and have published numerous papers and reports on our website where further information and contact details are available. See <http://www.pohg.org.uk/>.