

Case Study: Advice on Prescription

By South Liverpool Citizens Advice and Liverpool Clinical Commissioning Group

“The Advice on Prescription service gives our GPs an extra tool in the box for supporting people whose needs may not necessarily be medical but are absolutely impacting on how they feel. This has been particularly important in these times of austerity and local authority cuts. Our patients get fantastic support and advice and the feedback has been 100% positive. We see this type of social prescribing as a vitally important part of General Practice now and in the future.”

Dr Simon Bowers, Fulwood Green Medical Centre

Why “Advice on Prescription”?

GPs were telling us that they were seeing people experiencing high levels of distress caused by a variety of things, including debt, housing issues, job loss, relationship breakup and domestic abuse. Whilst they could provide referral to treatment for the mental distress, via psychological therapies, the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) understood that they needed help to deal with the practical issues as well.

South Liverpool Citizens Advice had been running a small project, providing advice within mental health inpatient and day centre settings for people with severe mental impairment (SMI), and could see the impact this was having on people’s lives. This provided the impetus for the CCG to fund a pilot to test a wider service, initially with 10% of the population in Liverpool through GPs. The pilot ran from 2013 – 2015 and provided the evidence needed to roll out a specialised advice service across the whole of Liverpool for vulnerable people.

What is “Advice on Prescription”?

The “Advice on Prescription” service is a complementary service to psychological therapies and primary care. Commissioned by Liverpool CCG and run by South Liverpool Citizens Advice, it provides a social treatment option for primary care teams, enabling direct referrals from GPs and mental health professionals to help address issues including financial hardship, housing difficulties, debt, relationship breakdown, bereavement, domestic abuse, worklessness and social isolation. The service provides an easy and reliable way for GPs and mental health services across Liverpool to refer vulnerable patients to a specialised advice service. Staff in the GP surgeries and mental health services receive awareness training about financial need and the services that Advice on Prescription offers, and then can refer anyone they deem vulnerable into the service via telephone, coded email or a centralised diary system and all referrals are accepted.

Once the referral is received by South Liverpool Citizens Advice, a support worker contacts the client, books an appointment for them at a GP practice (or health service) location of their choice and gets a brief idea of the problem. This is done within 48 hours of the referral. The client then attends an appointment with a Citizens Advice case worker, usually 45 minutes, which focuses on resolving the client's particular problem. This can be anything from preventing eviction, food, accessing benefits or finding somewhere safe to live.

All the data collected in the service is reported to the CCG, including data on health-related outcomes.

Achievements

Over 18,000 referrals have been made since the start of the service. Of these, approximately:

- 70% of clients had one or more long-term physical or mental health conditions
- 30% of clients were living on less than £400 a month
- 60% of clients had not used an advice service before
- 20% of clients had severe and enduring mental health difficulties

“The service enables us to help a group of people that we hadn't been able to reach systematically in this way before. We now have a Liverpool wide service and are changing lives with practical support: getting people places to stay, having electricity, increasing incomes – a whole range of practical things that make life a little bit easier.”

Caryn Matthews, Chief Officer, South Liverpool Citizens Advice

Last year, over 80% of referred patients report an increase in health and well-being.

- Households were on average £2,150 a year better off as a result of the referral.
- £10million in additional income was secured for referred patients

80% of referrals are from GPs, but it remains really important that the service is available for mental health professionals as well.

Enablers

- The pilot project provided data that made it easier to convince people the service was useful and effective at improving health outcomes for some of the poorest people in Liverpool.
- A strong steering group including GPs, practice managers, Clinical Commissioning Group and Liverpool City Council commissioners, data experts and Citizens Advice staff were engaged from the beginning. They shaped the project and were local champions, promoting it in different forums and sharing their experience.
- Communication and engagement was critical. Getting GP ownership, using GPs to tell their peers about the benefits of the service and using existing communication structures within primary care meant messages reached GPs. In addition, we visited GP practices every week to say hi, and ensure that everyone in the surgery knew about us and was referring to us.
- Feedback and follow up made a real difference. Each GP practice receives a letter every month providing details of the difference their practice has made that month, including, for example, referral figures and amount of income maximised for clients referred by them.

Challenges

- The biggest challenge was and remains getting GPs' ongoing engagement. GPs were supportive of the initiative but it took (and still takes) regular visits to remind them that we're here. Staff change, locums are used, so weekly interaction ensures the service is being fully used.

What would you do differently if you had to do it all again?

Have more staff and more resources! The support worker role is much more than just an administrative job. They're the first point of contact for the client and build rapport with the client. We underestimated the skill needed in this role and the level of knowledge they would gain which could be used by the case worker at the advice appointment.

Think about the right time for meetings with partners, particularly those working in health. We've discovered 11am – 12.30pm works well – it's after morning surgery sessions have finished and before home visits start. If you provide a light lunch, GPs will come!

We're continuing to look at how the service can be developed. It's still quite new, it's a big achievement that it's owned by primary care, it operates at scale and is really effective in reaching people and responding to their unmet needs. But, it can continue to grow and develop and we'll be using the data to help inform future development.

Citizens Advice collects data from across its network of 300 Independent local Citizens Advice charities who give advice in 2,600 community locations in England and Wales. Explore [Citizens Advice data tool](#) to find out problems faced by people in your area.

“GPs and other primary care staff in Liverpool are now able to ensure that the vulnerable people they meet can now also get practical support, with the confidence that Citizens Advice will provide a very rapid response to the need that they have uncovered.”

Clare Mahoney, Commissioning Manager,
Liverpool CCG